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OR,

THE WIZARD OF URKOS PASS.

A ROMANCE OF ARIZONA.

BY WILL LISENBEE.

CHAPTER I.

AT "THE DESERT FOUNTAIN."

"You are well acquainted with the country?"

"Si, senor."

"And you can guide to the ranch beyond Urkos Pass?"

"To any place in Arizona or Mexico."

"We shall want three burros. Can you get them?"

"A dozen if you wish, senor."

"Very well, three will do. When can you be ready to accompany me?"

"By sunrise to-morrow."

THE YOUNG RANCHER STOOD AS IF SPELLBOUND, FASCINATED BY THE STRANGE BEAUTY.
WAS IT POSSIBLE THIS WAS THE ROBBER QUEEN!

"That will do. How much am I to pay you for your services?"
 "And the burros?"
 "Yes."
 "It is dangerous traveling in the mountains."
 "I admit that."
 "Los Apaches?"
 "If you are afraid I will get another guide."
 "No—no, senor—I'm not afraid—but it is worth more when there is danger—great danger."
 "Very true!"
 "I ought to have a hundred dollars—"
 "Very well, I shall expect you here by sunrise. You may go."

With a low bow the Mexican guide turned and walked from the veranda, and Frank Hammond was alone.

He was a young man, not over twenty-three, of medium build, with light hair and deep blue eyes. His face was beardless, his complexion as delicate as that of a woman, yet beneath that mild exterior lurked a dauntless spirit, unflinching courage and great physical strength and activity. He wore a suit of light gray material that fitted closely about his well-proportioned form.

Frank Hammond had just arrived in Desert City, a little mining-town that lies near the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains, in South-east Arizona. He had come directly from Kansas City to join his father, who was the owner of a large cattle ranch which lay fifty miles from Desert City. He had traveled by stage from Tombstone that morning, and had been looking for some one to guide him across the mountains to his father's ranch. In the afternoon a Mexican, claiming to be a guide, had come to the young traveler at the hotel, and offered his services.

This led to the conversation with which our story opens.

Frank Hammond was seated on the piazza of the "Montezuma Hotel," a low, adobe structure with wide, sweeping verandas on three sides, and boasted of being the only hotel in Desert City.

The day was intensely hot—for it was mid-summer, and few people were astir in that sleepy little town. Now and then a Mexican ox-cart would go lumbering slowly along the dingy street, and here and there could be seen a few villainous-looking "Greasers" and half naked Indians, moving leisurely through the town.

"It seems strange that father did not meet me here, as he promised," mused Frank, throwing the stub of a cigar from his lips. "He should have been here yesterday. I think something has happened to him."

He drew a letter from his pocket as he spoke, and for the third or fourth time read as follows:

"DESERT CITY, ARIZONA,
 June 1, 18—

"MY DEAR SON:—I have just got settled on my new ranch fifty miles southeast of this place. I have already sold the one on the Pecos, in New Mexico, and shall make this my future home. So I have decided to have you come as soon as possible. Come to Desert City, via Tombstone, and I will meet you here, three weeks from to-day. However, if anything should happen to prevent my coming here to meet you at that time, you can easily secure a guide who can pilot you across the mountains. Your nearest route will be to take the old Zuni trail from here, and follow it to the Urkos Pass, then leave it and travel straight out for twenty-five miles. Hoping to see you at the appointed time, I am

"Your affectionate father,
 RICHARD HAMMOND."

"Yes, I must start for the ranch to-morrow," Frank mused, as he replaced the letter in his pocket. "Those devils of Apaches are on the rampage again, and I fear father has encountered some of them on his way here."

He rose from his seat and paced restlessly up and down the little piazza.

Presently he heard footsteps approaching, and turning, beheld a queer-looking old man standing before him. The stranger was fully six feet in height, and evidently was possessed of great muscular strength. A pair of keen gray eyes peered out from beneath his broad-rimmed hat. His face was nearly hidden by a short growth of dark whiskers which were sprinkled with gray. He was dressed in the garb of the typical prospector, and looked as if he had seen the rough side of life. A brace of heavy pistols ornamented his belt, while in his hand he carried a repeating rifle of the most improved pattern.

"Your name's Hammond, I reckon?" saluted the old man.

"You guessed it the first time," replied Frank, casting a look of surprise on the stranger. "But how did you learn my name?"

"You just said I guessed it," grinned the old man.

"Yes; but how?" laughed Frank.
 "Mebby I heard you talkin' to the proprietor of the hotel this mornin'—"
 "That is very likely."
 "An' mebbly I heard you ask if a man by the name of Hammond had come here yesterday—"
 "Well?"
 "Used to live on the Pecos, in New Mexico?"
 "Then you know my father!" exclaimed Frank.

"I know'd a man by the name of Richard Hammond."
 "He is my father! Have you seen him? Is he in town?"

"You can't be a son of the Hammond I know," the stranger observed, ignoring Frank's questions.

"Why do you think that?"
 "'Cause you hain't got none of his judgment."

"Perhaps not; but that has not yet been proven."

"Yes it has."
 "How do you mean?"

"You just now hired a guide?"
 "Yes."

"An' a Greaser?"
 "Yes—"

A low laugh escaped the old man's lips.
 "I'll be dinged if you hain't got lots to larn about this yere country, young feller," said the old man, "an' fore you're hyar very long you'll larn to have nothin' to do with them onery cusses—that is, if you don't git a knife in your back before you have a chance to larn."

"Look here, stranger," returned Frank, a little impatiently. "Your advice may be well meant and all that, but, don't you lose any sleep on my account. I am amply able to take care of myself. I believe you know something about my father which you could tell me if you will. If you will not, it is useless for us to bandy words over the matter."

"I'll be dinged if you ain't a son of your dad's!" admitted the old fellow, advancing and extending his hand. "I know your father. I was working on a ranch on the Pecos when I first saw him."

"You have not seen him lately?"
 "No; not since he left the Pecos Ranch."

"He promised to meet me here yesterday, but it seems he never came. I shall start for the ranch to-morrow morning."

"Across the mountains?"
 "Yes."

"It'll be a dangerous journey. You may run onto some Apaches."

"You are right, and a Greaser is a poor person to depend upon in time of danger."

"That's correct."
 "Perhaps I could get you to accompany me also?"

"I was jist goin to offer my services."
 "I will pay you liberally."

"Then I won't go."
 "What do you mean?" questioned Frank, in astonishment.

"Nothin'; only I don't want no pay. Your father did me a good turn once—up on the Pecos, an' I don't mind takin' a run over to his ranch with you, if you're willin'."

"Just as you please about the pay," replied Frank. "I shall certainly be glad to have you with me."

"Then I'll go."
 "Very well. We start at sunrise to-morrow."

"That will suit me to a tee. But, I hain't told you my name—"

"No."

"Well, jist call me Nat. They used to call me Nathan Barker, but when I come to Arizona I jist biled it down to Nat. A man don't have much use for a name out here, anyhow. I hain't had no use for mine yit, but I reckon a feller feels better to have some kind of a handle to go by. Wal, I must be movin'. I got a cabin up the holler. I reckon I'll go an' be packin' up for the journey. Will you walk up with me?"

"No, I thank you, Nat; I don't feel like moving about much in this bake-oven atmosphere."

"Then I'll see you to-night when the sun goes down," and with this Nat Barker strode up the street.

Although few people were astir in Desert City during the day, the same could not be said of it at night, for scarcely had the fiery sun gone down, when a magical change took place. The streets became thronged with people, and the saloons and gambling-places were crowded.

Lighting a cigar, Frank Hammond strolled leisurely down the busy street. He passed through the busiest part of the town, and so absorbed

was he in thought, that before he was aware of the fact he was in the outskirts of the "city."

He turned to retrace his steps, when, suddenly, a dark form sprung toward him; he caught the gleam of a knife in the starlight; but leaping quickly aside, Frank dealt his assailant a blow that sent him staggering against the wall of an adobe shanty.

Frank then quickly drew his pistol, but before he could bring it into action, the would-be assassin turned, and dodging behind the building, disappeared in the darkness. But in the brief glance he had obtained of the desperado, Frank recognized the Mexican guide he had engaged that evening!

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered Frank, as he walked back to the hotel. "I believe Nat was right about those Greasers. I'm glad I found out this one in time. I must see Nat and tell him of my adventure, and have him secure some burros for us. I don't think I care to employ that guide."

He walked swiftly up the street and was soon passing in front of the "Desert Fountain" Saloon.

"Perhaps I shall find Nat in here," he thought, turning and entering the open door.

The room was filled with a mixed crowd of gold miners, gamblers, cowboys and Mexicans. In the front part of the long, dingy room was a bar which was receiving liberal patronage.

Further back were several gambling-tables, surrounded by an eager crowd, and money was being staked freely.

As Frank entered the place a shaggy-bearded man of about thirty-five, with a pair of heavy pistols sticking in his belt, approached the bar and ordered a drink of the "worst pizen in the place."

"There was an evil look about his face, and it was evident by the way the customers at the bar gave him room that he was a bully of some sort."

"Hello, Mockton!" saluted the bartender, familiarly, shaking hands with the new-comer. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Been out rounding up tenderfeet for the fool-killer!" blurted Mockton, as he poured his liquor into the glass.

"Well, I reckon you got enough for a shipment," laughed the bartender.

"Yes, I done a pretty fair business—" then, as his eyes fell on Frank Hammond, he added: "I'm afraid I overlooked a Maverick, though," and he nodded significantly at Frank.

The crowd in the room broke into a roar of laughter at this, and all eyes were turned on Frank. But if aware that the words were meant for him, Frank's countenance failed to show it.

"Young man," continued Mockton, "you look as if you might have been raised on buttermilk. Come up to the bar and let me put my brand upon you."

"Were you speaking to me?" questioned Frank, suddenly turning on Mockton.

"Well, now, that's pretty cool," grunted the bully—for Mockton was a bully, and few men in Desert City cared to cross him—"I reckon you'll learn to listen when I talk, before you leave this town."

"You must be something of an orator," suggested Frank, sarcastically.

"Well, yes!" blurted Mockton, his voice rising in anger as he spoke, "and when a pale-haired skunk like you gets sassy, I jist stand him on his head in a spittoon till I get through with my speech."

The crowd again broke into a roar of laughter. All evidently believed that Mockton was going to furnish them some rare sport at the expense of the stranger. They expected him to wilt at this speech from the bully, and one of the bystanders whispered to Mockton not to be too hard on the tenderfoot at first, as he might be frightened away. They exchanged glances of surprise, however, when Frank Hammond replied:

"I believe your speeches to be like your threats—all wind."

"You impudent little skunk!" fairly roared the infuriated Mockton; "do you think I'll take such sass without mopping the floor with you?"

"Without your trying it," corrected Frank, coolly.

"You don't think I can't do it, do you?"

"Do you want me to take your word for it?" queried Hammond, merrily. "You seem to be a better talker than you are fighter."

A murmur of surprise went through the crowd at this taunt. Instead of weakening, as they had all expected, the young fellow was actually poking fun at the bully.

With a fierce oath, and clinching his fist, the

ruffian rushed at Frank, but before he could cover the space separating them, Frank leaped like a flash and struck the bully a blow in the left temple, knocking him over a chair and landing him sprawling upon the floor.

So quickly had it all happened that the surprised spectators had hardly time to realize what had taken place before the discomfited Champion of Desert City lay at their feet.

But scarcely had Mockton touched the floor, when he was up again, and with a furious cry drew a pistol from his belt. But, as he turned on the young man, his eyes met the gleam of blue steel! Frank Hammond had him "covered."

"Don't try any of that on me!" warned Frank, in a calm voice. "You have forced this quarrel upon me, and I have simply acted in self-defense. Don't tempt me to go further."

A cry of baffled rage escaped Mockton. The crowd surged about the two men. Suddenly Frank felt some one grasp his arm and turn his pistol downward. Then, quick as a flash, and before he could disengage his arm from the grasp of the stranger, Mockton raised his pistol and leveled it at the young man's breast. The next instant there was a loud report, then the sound of a heavy body falling to the floor.

CHAPTER II.

A SURPRISE.

INSTANTLY there came the crack of another revolver—six times in rapid succession, followed by the crashing of glass, and the room was in total darkness. Some one had shot out the lights.

Exclamations of surprise came from the surging crowd; knives and pistols were drawn, and a scene of the greatest excitement ensued.

"Gentlemen," called out the saloon-keeper, in a loud voice, "just keep perfectly quiet till I strike a light. There's no cause to get excited."

In a few moments a light was made, and the crowd of excited citizens gathered around the form of the man lying on the floor.

"I reckon he won't tackle me again, soon," observed Mockton, grimly.

But a cry of astonishment came from the men bending over the prostrate figure on the floor.

"Bill Mockton," said one of them, turning about, "what does this mean? You have shot Sandy Wiggins instead of the stranger!"

"What! what is that you say!" ejaculated the bully, a pallor overspreading his face.

"You have shot Sandy Wiggins!" responded Bushy Smith, the city marshal. "How did this happen?"

"Some cuss struck my arm just as I pulled the trigger," answered Mockton, approaching and bending over the wounded man.

A groan came from the man on the floor; he opened his eyes and raised himself to a sitting posture, the blood trickling from a wound across his forehead.

Water was brought, and when the blood was washed from his face, it was found that the bullet had only glanced across his forehead, cutting an ugly furrow as it went.

"Tain't hurt you much," said one of the men, assisting the wounded man to his feet, "but it war a perty close call."

"Curse your awkward hide!" cried Wiggins, turning to Mockton; "is this the way you treat a feller that's helpin' you out of a scrape?"

"It wasn't my fault, Sandy," declared Mockton, apologetically. "Some one struck my arm just in the nick of time. Curse him, I'll get even with him for his smartness."

"Who was it?" asked the marshal.

"He's a stranger to me," responded Mockton, "a tall man with short gray whiskers."

"It's the fellow I've seen saunterin' around town for the past few days," cried the marshal.

"Where is the rascal?" asked another.

In the excitement of the moment all had forgotten Frank Hammond and the stranger who had shot out the lights.

Hurriedly the crowd glanced about the room. The two strangers had disappeared!

"Curse them both!" hissed Mockton, "I'll pay them for this night's work, if it takes a lifetime!"

"Gentlemen," observed the saloon-keeper, "I reckon it's my treat. Come up, everybody, an' take a sip o' nectar. Then we'll talk this matter over."

Then came the sound of the crowd gathering up to the bar, followed by the clinking of many glasses.

A half hour later two men entered a little cabin that nestled among the hills, a mile from

Desert City. They were Frank Hammond and Nat Barker.

"Jist meck yourself at home," observed Nat, lighting a lamp and placing it on a pine box that served as a table. "I reckon we'll jist spend the night here, and start for the ranch in the mornin'."

"I ought to have stayed in town," declared Frank. "That cowardly bully will think he has driven me away."

"Let him think," remarked Nat. "I guess we can afford it, jist now. Ding my cats, if them rascals wouldn't 'a' fixed you if I hadn't 'a' happened in jist when I did. Mockton would 'a' plugged you sure, while that other cuss held your arms."

"You are right, Nat; I was in a deuced close place."

"Yes, and that Mockton has a gang of cut-throats about him, and not one of 'em would hesitate to commit murder. We are both strangers here, and it's best to keep out of trouble if we can."

"Yes, that is best, I suppose," admitted Frank, "and I thank you for the service you have rendered me."

"You needn't mention it. It ain't my nature to see a feller imposed upon, and when I saw they weren't goin' to give you a fair show, I jist slid in. But you did knock Mockton out in a way that did me good to see. Where'd you larn to hit sich sledge-hammer blows?"

"We used to practice that sort of business at school," laughed Frank. "It seems that a man's education stands him in good stead even in Arizona."

"I'd say it did," chuckled Nat.

"What was this Mockton's object in picking a quarrel with me?"

"I can't tell exactly, but it's his way, though he might 'a' had some special object in this case."

"Well, whatever his object was, he didn't seem to accomplish it."

"No; not in the way he expected, I reckon," laughed Nat.

"Nat," said Frank, "I didn't tell you that a Mexican desperado attacked me with a knife to-night. He intended to rob me, I suppose."

"Great Christopher Columbo! but you're havin' a lively time."

"Yes, but he failed to catch me napping."

"I see he did, or you wouldn't be here."

"And I recognized him before he escaped."

"What?"

"It was the Mexican guide I had engaged to take me across the mountains!"

"The blazes!"

"Yes; and now I am under the necessity of getting some one else to take us to the ranch."

"It is no more than I expected. These Greasers are treacherous as ole Satan."

"Can you get us some animals?"

"Yes, I think I can. There is a ranch a few miles from here where they have a lot of burros and horses."

"Then we must go there early in the morning and see what can be done."

It was late when the two men retired. The sun was shining brightly when they awoke. They ate a hurried breakfast and began to make preparations for their journey.

"How long have you been in this place?" asked Frank.

"Only about a week or two," was the reply. "I was jist knockin' about the country, and discovered this ole cabin here and no one in it, so I jist settled down for a spell. I reckon I could 'a' found a better place as far as society is concerned, but I may want to transact a little business before I leave here for good."

"I believe you could have found a place where the society is better," laughed Frank, "that is—judging by the experience I have had since my arrival."

In a short time they were ready to begin their journey.

"Do you think we shall encounter any Apaches on our way across the mountains?" questioned Frank as the two set out over the low sandy hills in the direction of the ranch Nat had spoken of the night before. "I hear they are on the war-path again."

"Well, we may run across some of the smokies," admitted Nat, "but the Government troops have been ordered out from Fort Grant, to go and put down the outbreak, and this may cause the red imps to keep a little shy for a few weeks."

"I'm not anxious to encounter old Geronimo," admitted Frank. "I've read of him in the papers, which is as close an acquaintance as I care about making with him."

It was full six miles from Nat's cabin to the

ranch to which they were traveling, and as the sun rose higher and higher above the dreary waste of sandy hills, Frank became almost prostrated with the intense heat.

"Whew! this is simply roasting weather!" he exclaimed, looking about for some sort of shade in which to escape the fiery rays of the sun. "Let us stop and cool off a little, Nat—that is, if we can find a bush large enough to furnish us a shade."

"All right," assented Nat, "I guess you're not used to sich weather as this, and we'll have to take it a leetle slow at first. Come this way." And the old fellow led the way to the top of a little hill where a solitary jack-oak stood like a sentinel amid the sun-scorched sands.

On reaching the spot they threw themselves in the shade, grateful to escape the burning sun for even a brief period.

Nearly five miles away, in the plain below, lay Desert City, its clusters of irregular adobe buildings plainly visible through the clear air.

Far to the east lay a spur of the Sierra Madre Mountains, stretching far to the south across the border into old Mexico.

As the two travelers lay gazing down the gentle slope toward the little town, Nat uttered a cry of surprise.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"Look!" and Nat pointed to a number of horsemen which were moving up the old trail from Desert City.

"Who can it be?" questioned Frank, "and where do you suppose they are going?"

For some time Nat was silent, then, turning to his companion, he said:

"Now that's jist what I don't know. It puzzles me to understand it."

"They are coming this way and riding at a gallop."

"I'll be hanged if they ain't."

"Well, we shall soon know what is up," replied Frank, "for they will be here in a short time."

A silence fell between the two men which was only broken by the sound of a faint breeze in the branches overhead.

As the advancing party drew near, it was discovered that every man carried a rifle slung across his saddle.

"There must be Apaches around," observed Frank, casting a questioning glance at his companion.

But, Nat shook his head, a grave look settling over his face.

Presently the tramp of horses' feet could be heard, then a dozen armed horsemen galloped up the slope, and spurred their panting horses up to where the two men lay.

The party was headed by the city marshal and Bill Mockton.

"There the rascals are!" cried Mockton, pointing to Frank and Nat, and instantly a dozen guns were leveled at the two men.

Frank and Nat had risen to their feet, and stood confronting the party, a look of astonishment on their faces.

"What does this mean?" demanded Frank, in a calm tone.

"It means this," blurted Mockton, "that you are both our prisoners. We arrest you for the robbing of the Tombstone Stage last night and for the murder of two passengers!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

NAT BARKER and Frank Hammond stood as if glued to the spot, a look of utter astonishment sweeping over their faces.

Nat was the first to speak.

"Say fellers, ain't you a little off your ker-base?" he questioned, eying the men critically.

"That is for the judge to decide," replied the marshal. Then, turning to Mockton, he said: "Take one of the men and disarm the prisoners while we keep 'em covered."

Mockton threw himself from his saddle, and approaching Frank, laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Hand over your pistols," he demanded, sharply, giving the young man a rude shake. "If you make any bad breaks we'll bore a dozen holes in your onery carcass."

As he spoke he attempted to take the pistols from Frank's belt, but the next moment he received a stinging blow from the young man's fist which sent him staggering backward, while, quick as a flash Frank drew his pistol, but the next moment he received a heavy blow from behind, and fell senseless upon the ground.

When he recovered consciousness he found that he had been disarmed and his hands bound. Near him stood Old Nat, his hands bound behind him.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" demanded Frank, as soon as he was able to speak.

"Mean a rope, I reckon," chuckled Mockton. "It's about time we'd put a stop to this killing and robbing business, and a rope is about the best thing to do it with."

"I shall make you repent this," replied Frank. "You pretend to think that we have committed robbery, when you know better. You are a set of rascals and I shall see that you are punished for this outrage."

Mockton answered by giving vent to a coarse laugh.

"It's well enough for you to play innocent, but that don't prove anything," observed the marshal. Then turning to Mockton, he added: "Bind the prisoners on two of the horses and some of us can ride double. Let's be off."

"Yes, the boys are kinder anxious for a hanging exercise," replied Mockton, with a chuckle, "and I reckon we ain't the men to keep 'em waiting."

Frank and Nat were speedily compelled to mount the animals which were selected for their use, after which they were securely bound to the saddles. Then the little cavalcade rode down the slope toward Desert City, at a brisk trot.

The two prisoners were thoughtful and silent. Well they knew the character of the men into whose hands they had fallen. With only a vague understanding of the true situation, it was difficult to determine what the outcome would be. That they were suspected of having been implicated in the robbing of the stage was evident; but both Frank and Nat felt sure that Mockton was the prime mover in attempting to fasten the guilt upon them. Although it would be easy to establish their innocence of the crime with which they were charged if they were given a fair chance, yet with an enemy to advise like Mockton, it was doubtful that they would be given even a chance to do so. It had been customary, in that region, to string up parties suspected, without going to the trouble of a trial. Both being strangers, the prisoners realized that their situation was a grave one.

An excited crowd of citizens were gathered in the street awaiting the arrival of the marshal and the prisoner.

They were conducted into a large adobe building, and ushered into the presence of a shaggy-headed justice, who was waiting to give the prisoners a hearing.

"Gentlemen," said the marshal, glancing at the crowd, "we have captured two men who are undoubtedly guilty of this outrage that has been committed. It is our duty to see that they are punished, but we must first give them a trial, though I have no doubt of their guilt."

"Not in the least," broke in Mockton.

"We orter string 'em up right now," cried one of the crowd.

"You bet!" sanctioned another.

"String 'em up! string 'em up!" came from a dozen excited voices, and a great crowd began to surge in at the open door.

It was not surprising that the citizens became excited, and impatient, for there had been three robberies within as many weeks, and in the last, two men had been murdered by the robbers.

Indeed, so great was the indignation of the populace, it was evident the prisoners would be summarily dealt with unless immediate steps were taken to prevent it.

The justice, although an illiterate and uncouth-looking character, was a firm believer in giving everybody fair play, and after calling for silence, he said:

"Fellers, hit ain't no use ter git excited over this thing. The pris'ners may be guilty an' they may not. That's jist the way it stan's. If they air guilty then they orter be punished, an' I ain't got a word ter say, but if they ain't guilty, then I say they orter be released. I don't think thar's a man in Desert City mean enough ter punish an innocent purson."

"No, boys; the judge is right," agreed one of the men. "I'm in fer givin' 'em a fair show."

"Me too," added another.

"An' as I was jist goin' ter remark," continued the justice, "thar ain't goin' ter be any hangin' hyer tell these fellers are given a chance, an' I've decided to hold the pris'ners tell tomorrow before givin' 'em a hearin'."

This had the effect of quieting the angry citizens, somewhat, and turning to the marshal the justice ordered that the prisoners be taken to the jail and locked up and a guard placed in front of the jail door.

That evening a little before sunset, a horseman rode into Desert City. He had come by the Tombstone road, and hitching his panting horse to the nearest rack, he entered the Desert Foun-

tain, and began scanning the faces of the crowd present. A sudden light of recognition shone in his eyes as they encountered Mockton.

It was evident that Mockton recognized the new-comer, but neither spoke. The stranger walked to the bar, ordered a drink, drank it, and then strolled leisurely toward the rear end of the hall, where a few men were gathered about a faro table. He stood for some time watching the game, and Mockton, approached and stood by his side.

For some time the two stood there in silence, then, unobserved by any of the bystanders, the new-comer slipped something into Mockton's hand. A few moments later the stranger left the saloon, and mounting his horse, galloped out of town upon the Tombstone road.

Mockton thrust the bit of folded paper which had been placed in his hand into his pocket, and turned from the gambling table. He was in the act of leaving the room when the bartender called to him.

"Well, what are they going to do with the men that was captured?" queried the dispenser, leaning on the bar. "String 'em up, I reckon?"

"That's just what we ought to do," declared Mockton, "but some of the boys are in favor of giving them a trial."

"Tain't no way to do business," asserted the bartender; "I'm in for stringin' 'em up without any foolishness."

"That was my idea."

"Do you think one of them is Red Rufus?"

"I am sure of it."

"And the other?"

"I don't know; one of the gang, I suppose."

"They must have their rendezvous near here, and if they have, I believe we can capture the whole gang, if the matter is managed properly."

"But what is the use of catching the robbers if we are going to play the fool and give them a chance to escape? Who knows but what a dozen of their pals may be in the town now, waiting for a chance to rescue them from our hands."

"You are right, Mockton. We can't be too careful, and a sharp watch should be kept over the prisoners to prevent any chance of escape or rescue. But we will never break up the gang till we lay hands on Merto, the Robber Queen. She is a devil, if there ever was one, and has managed to escape every time she has been located, in spite of every officer and detective in Arizona."

"That's a fact. Maverick Mose, the Arizona Detective, thought he had her once, up at Tombstone, but she gave him the slip."

"I heard something of that; but, how did it happen?"

"This Maverick Mose captured one of her gang, so I heard, and promised not to prosecute him if he'd give information that would lead to the capture of the Robber Queen and Red Rufus."

"Well, did he do it?"

"Yes—that is, he pretended to. Told them of a place in the mountains where the robbers had their rendezvous."

"But the robbers wasn't there?"

"No; a posse of armed men visited the place, and found nothing, save the place where some one had been camped."

"And the robber they had captured—what became of him?"

"I was just going to say, that when the man returned to Tombstone the outlaw had broken jail and escaped."

"How did he manage it?"

"Well, he was aided by some of his pals, who had doubtless been in the town all the time, waiting for a favorable opportunity to help him escape."

"We must see to it that the same thing don't happen here."

"That's right, and if Red Rufus is ever at large again it will be because we and a set of fools."

"Who is this Maverick Mose? I've heard of him, and it was reported that he had visited this place, but if he did, no one here recognized him."

"I can't tell you who he is, though I did hear he was a cowboy from across the country somewhere east of here."

"He had better go back to cow-punching," laughed the bartender, "if he can't do better than he has done."

At this juncture several customers approached the bar, and Mockton turned and walked hastily from the room.

CHAPTER IV.

A DIABOLICAL SCHEME.

NIGHT was coming down on Desert City. The figure of a man entered a small adobe

shanty in the outskirts of the town, closing and bolting the door after him. A moment later a kerosene lamp was lit, revealing the scowling visage of Bill Mockton.

He seated himself by a rickety pine table, and drawing a piece of paper from his pocket, he unfolded it and read as follows:

"Be on your guard. *Maverick Mose, the Arizona Detective, is in Desert City.*"

The paper contained no date or signature, and was written in a hurried, scrawling hand.

Mockton uttered a snarl as he read these few words, and rising, he crushed the paper in his hand, and began pacing restlessly up and down the narrow room.

"Curse him," he hissed, savagely, "let me but once get my eyes upon him, and I'll bore his carcass so full of holes that it won't hold baled hay. For months he has dogged my footsteps, and three times I have been forced to fly to escape him. And so he has tracked me here! A thousand curses! Will he never cease following me? I must be on the lookout. If he is here, I may expect trouble at any moment. I must see the marshal and put him on the alert. I wonder if that detective is really in Desert City at this moment. If he is I must have seen him, and yet—"

Mockton stopped suddenly, and stood as if turned to stone, a fierce light burning in his eyes.

Suddenly he lifted his clinched hand with a spasmodic jerk, and bringing it down with a vigorous thump upon the table in front of him, he hissed:

"Fools! idiots! *Nat Barker is the man*, and I'll swear to it, yet not one has suspected it. My God!" he continued, with a gasp, "can't we see anything? But, he is in our power now, curse him, and he must not live to see another day—"

A knock at the door interrupted him.

"Who is it?" demanded Mockton, laying his hand upon his pistol.

Five slow, deliberate taps upon the door was the only answer.

Without another word Mockton approached, and drawing back the bolt, threw the door open.

The city marshal entered.

"Well, are the prisoners securely caged?" queried Mockton, carefully rebolting the door.

"Yes; and now what's to be done?"

Both men had now seated themselves by the table.

Mockton made no answer, but handed the piece of paper which he held in his hand to the marshal.

An exclamation of astonishment broke from the marshal's lips as he read it.

"When did you receive this?" he asked, his voice betraying his emotion.

"An hour ago."

"Who brought it?"

"One of the men."

"Did he say how they discovered this fact?"

"No; he gave me the letter and rushed away without saying a word."

"This is all the word that was sent?"

"Yes—all."

The marshal gave vent to a low whistle.

"Do you think the detective is really here?" he asked.

"I do."

"I have suspected no one of being Maverick Mose. I know nearly everybody in town, and I am puzzled to locate him."

"Of course," scornfully.

"You seem very positive."

"I am."

"Perhaps you have seen him, then?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This evening."

The marshal jumped to his feet, an exclamation of astonishment escaping his lips.

"Where is he, now?" the officer asked, eagerly; "we must find him—we must not let him escape—"

Mockton threw out his hand with a gesture of impatience.

"Sit down!" he cried, authoritatively. "I want to talk business. If he escapes us now it will be your fault."

"What do you mean?"

A sarcastic laugh escaped Mockton.

"The deuce! are you blind?" he hissed, in a tone of disgust. "Can't you see a rope till it is around your neck? You jest locked up a man who gives his name as Nat Barker—"

"Yes—but you don't mean to say?"

"He is the man!"

"The devil and Tom Walker!" gasped the marshal, "how did you find this out?"

"I have suspected him for several days, but this note confirms my suspicions. There is no doubt but that he is the man."

"Then who is this Hammond?"

"That I can't tell, but he is in bad company. I owe him a grudge, and mean to pay it," fiercely, "and whatever we do must be done immediately."

"You are right. We must act at once, for there is no telling what to-morrow may bring forth. But, how are we to accomplish our purpose?"

"I will see to that."

"Good! I have charge of the prisoners, and it will be easy to carry out any plan for putting them out of the way, but it must be done so as to not attach any suspicion to either of us. What is your scheme?"

"Look," and Mockton drew a small box from beneath the table, and raising the cover, displayed several sticks of giant powder. "The work must be done with this."

The marshal started.

"Do you mean to—"

"To blow up the jail—yes."

"But, it will alarm the whole town—we would be found out—"

Mockton smiled.

"I see you don't understand my plan."

"No, I'll be hanged if I do. How is it to be managed?"

"That is easily explained," asserted Mockton.

"I'll just place a piece of fuse in the box. One end will be connected with the powder, and the other with a candle—about an inch from the top."

"Go on."

"Then you are to place the box in the jail."

"Yes."

"In the empty room against the wooden partition."

"I see."

"Then you will simply light the candle. Then lock the door and come to the Desert Fountain saloon."

"Correct."

"In a half hour there will be a great explosion."

"I see—I see!"

"Well, our presence at the Desert Fountain will keep off any chance of our being suspected of having anything to do with it. We can give out the theory that an attempt must have been made by the pals of the prisoners to blow up the jail and rescue the two men, but they used too much powder—didn't know the strength of giant powder, see?"

"I do see, and your plan is simply immense. It can't help but work!" cried the marshal, in evident admiration of his companion.

"That's what I think. Now, have you a guard placed over the prisoners?"

"Yes; Simpkins is there now."

"Then you must release him at twelve o'clock."

"I have already promised to do that."

"So much the better. That will leave the coast clear for action."

For nearly an hour the two conspirators remained in close consultation. Then the marshal took his leave, and hurried into the town.

It was twelve o'clock when Mockton emerged from the cabin, carrying a small box under his arm.

He advanced a few paces from the house, and pausing, glanced cautiously about him. Then, as if satisfied that no one was lurking in the vicinity, he walked hastily toward the jail, a half mile away.

He found the marshal standing a few yards from the lock-up, awaiting his arrival.

"You have brought the box, eh?" saluted the marshal, in a guarded whisper.

"You bet!" replied Mockton, in the same cautious tone.

"Is it all ready to light?"

"Correct; all wound up and ready to strike," with a chuckle.

The two men withdrew to a clump of mesquites a short distance away, where they would not be observed by any one who might chance to pass that way.

"Have you been down to town since I left you?" asked the marshal.

"No; why do you ask?"

"Then you have not heard the news?"

"No; what is it?"

"Curse the luck!" hissed the marshal, "the keeper of the Montezuma Hotel says he thinks this Hammond is no robber. Says the young man's father owns a big ranch across the range, and that he stopped at his hotel not a month ago."

"The deuce you say!"

"Yes, and he's going to inquire into the case to-morrow."

"That's a bad go."

"And the chances are that the prisoner will be released to-morrow, if—"

"If nothing happens."

"Exactly!"

"Then we must make doubly sure that it does happen."

"That's the idea."

"But what does the hotel-keeper say about this man Barker?"

"He don't know anything about him; but you see how it will all end if we let matters go on as they are?"

"Yes, I see. Well, the cards are in our hands, and all we have to do is to play them and rake in the pot. Has Simpkins been relieved?"

"Yes; he left as soon as I came."

"Then let us get to business. All you have to do is to place the box in the empty room close to the partition, then light the candle—there can't be no harm in lighting a candle,"—and Mockton laughed a coarse, evil laugh—"then just leave things to work out their own course."

The marshal now took the box, and placing it under his arm, remarked:

"Wait for me at the Desert Fountain, and I'll be there in a few minutes."

Mockton then turned and walked toward the saloon, a feeling of certain triumph in his evil breast.

Although it was nearly one o'clock when he reached the Desert Fountain, he found it still open, and the gambling tables full.

Twenty minutes later the marshal entered the saloon.

"All fixed?" queried Mockton, in a low tone.

"Yes; and it will work like a charm."

CHAPTER V.

A WAY TO LIBERTY.

To return to Nat Barker and Frank Hammond whom we left in the little adobe jail.

The jail was a low, two-room structure, and evidently had been an old Spanish mission house, which "civilization" had put to other uses. On the north side of the building lay a mass of ruins, over which stood the crumbling walls of what had once been the main building. The north wall of what now served as a jail had been constructed by the citizens of Desert City, and was composed of sun-dried bricks or adobe. Through the center of the building had also been placed a heavy oaken partition through which a door opened into the south room, the outside door opening into the north apartment. The floor consisted of flat rocks, similar to ordinary rough flag-stones.

The south room, the one in which the two prisoners were confined, was about twelve by fourteen feet in area and was lit by a single small window high up in the western wall, and looking toward the town.

In one end of the room lay several sheepskins and a small sack of wool which were to serve as bed and pillow for the prisoners.

On a pine box lay a tallow candle and some matches; but, as the darkness deepened neither of the prisoners attempted to strike a light.

At about seven o'clock they had been provided with a lunch of cold mutton and a few slices of hard bread, but it was left untouched.

"Nat," said Frank, breaking the silence, "this is the work of Mockton, that we are here. I feel sure of it; but, how do you account for his wishing to fasten the crime upon us?"

"That's jist what puzzles me," returned Nat, "but I'm goin' to git at the bottom of his scheme—jist see if I don't."

"This don't look much like it," laughed Frank, "being shut up in a Mexican bake-oven. But, what do they aim to do with us? They will surely be compelled to release us, though I don't believe Mockton would hesitate to have us hung if he could do so on his own false testimony."

"That's jist where the trouble lies, and it's liable to go hard with us unless we can convince the citizens that we not are the men they want."

"But, how are we to do that?" asked Frank.

"There is only one way to circumvent them for the present."

"What is that?"

"We must not be here when to-morrow comes."

"That would be an excellent plan; but, unfortunately, we are not at liberty to leave just yet; and as these walls are three feet thick it would take us a week to dig through them with nothing to work with but a pocket-knife."

"Then we must not attempt it."

"Have you any other plan?"

"We might examine the floor."

"Which is of hard stone."

"Yes; but it is in slabs which might be removed. If we could manage to remove some of these, who knows but what we might be able to dig our way out? The jail is on the edge of a deep ravine, and the sandy soil is not hard to dig through."

"We can soon examine the floor and find out what can be done," responded Frank, "but there is a guard stationed in front of the jail."

"I know it, but one of us can watch while the other works. We needn't make any noise to disturb the guard."

"You are right; but there is only one candle in the place. It won't last long, and it may be necessary to work in the dark, part of the time."

"Let's take a look at the situation and we can tell more about it," responded Nat, striking a match and lighting the candle.

Frank Hammond took his station by the window for the purpose of keeping a watch on the guard, while Nat began examining the floor, screening the light by his hat, from the window, that it might not be seen from the outside.

Five minutes passed in silence.

"How do you find it?" asked Frank.

"Big slabs of rock."

"Can you move them?"

"I can't tell yet. Give me your knife, and I'll see if I can't dig down between 'em so I can git a finger-hold."

Frank threw his knife to Nat, who took it and began probing between the rocks in silence.

A half hour passed, and then Nat turned to companion.

"Can you see the guard?" he queried.

"Yes."

"Is he very close?"

"No; he is several yards away, sitting on a rock."

"Well, jist come here a moment and see if we can't lift this slab."

Frank knelt on the floor beside Nat, and thrusting fingers in the crevice scooped out by Nat, the two men sought to lift the huge stone from its place, but their efforts were futile.

"You'll have to make the crevice deeper, so that we can get a better hold," advised Frank, and he rose and took his position at the window again, while Nat resumed work.

In fifteen minutes Nat again called to Frank, and this time, to their delight, the rock yielded to their united strength and was lifted from its place.

Eagerly the two men peered into the open space left by the rock, exclamations of disappointment escaping them as they beheld another rock still below.

"The house is built upon a rock," declared Frank, in a disappointed tone.

"Hold on," responded Nat, "there's another slab like the first down there, and I think it can be moved, by doin' a little work. Don't git discouraged. It's a long time till daylight, and I expect to work all night if necessary. Jist you keep an eye on the guard, and I'll go on with the work."

Frank approached the window and looked out. The guard had risen and was walking up and down the path about twenty yards away.

Nat resumed work, and in a short time announced that he had loosened the other stone. With Frank's help, he soon raised it from its place. Then taking the candle he examined the bottom of the hole.

The bottom was of solid rock, without seam or crevice!

"It's no use," he declared, in a low tone. "It's solid rock in the bottom, and can't be moved without takin' up the whole floor, and maybe not then."

"What shall we do?" asked Frank, in a perplexed voice.

"The first thing, I suppose, is to put back the rocks. If we fail to git out and they should discover that we had been tryin' to break out, I reckon they'd think we were robbers, sure enough."

"You are right, Nat but I hope we may not have to remain here to find out what they think."

Nat now slipped one of the rocks back into the hole, and as he did so a cry from his lips brought Frank quickly to his side.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"There's an openin' below or I'm a liar," averred Nat.

"What makes you think so?" asked Frank.

"Listen," exclaimed Nat, in a low tone, as he lifted the rock and let it drop back gently to its place. "Do you hear how holler that

sounds? There's a cellar below or I'm greatly mistaken!"

"I'll be hanged if there isn't an opening of some kind down there," agreed Frank, "but how can we reach it, since we cannot displace the rocks that separate us from it?"

"The rocks ain't very thick, and I believe we could break through if we had—"

"There! that is the very thing to do it with," exclaimed Frank, pointing to the rock which Nat still held in his hands.

"The idea, exactly!" affirmed Nat. "Now for business! But, we must be careful, or the noise may be heard by the guard."

"Yes, but I think we can manage that part. We can deaden the sound of the rock by placing one of the sheepskins in the hole, and work only when the guard is not near. Just wait till I take a peep at him, and then we'll begin work."

As he spoke he approached the window and peered out.

"Nat," he called in a low whisper, "we can't do it now. He's right here by the house."

Quickly the light was extinguished and the two men stood by the window, waiting for the guard to move. He was leaning against a little tree not five paces away.

Slowly the hours went by, and still the guard without kept within close range of the jail. It was past midnight when Frank turned from the window and spoke to Nat.

"There's some one talking to the guard," he whispered, "Perhaps they may take it into their heads to come in and see if everything is all right, so be ready to throw the sheepskins over the hole in the floor if I give you the signal."

For some time the two men on the outside continued in close conversation. Then, suddenly, they withdrew to a little grove fifty or sixty yards away.

"Now is our time, Nat!" cried Frank; "they have gone to the little grove up yonder, and can't hear the noise we'll make."

The two prisoners now hurriedly bent over the hole into which Nat had thrown a piece of sheepskin to deaden the sound of the battering-ram, and then lifting the huge stone, they dashed it down, end foremost into the cavity. A dull, hollow sound came from the floor, but the rock did not yield. Again and again they repeated the blow, and then—the rock broke through, the splintered fragments falling with a dull echo into an opening beneath.

"There! I'll be hanged if we hain't done it!" cried Nat, in a joyful whisper. "Now jist keep an eye on the men while I go below and reconnoiter."

Quickly Nat relit the candle and placed it by the opening. A musty odor came from below as he commenced to descend through the ragged hole, which was barely large enough to admit his body. The next moment he dropped about six feet onto a rocky floor, and found himself in blackest darkness.

"Give me the candle," he called back to Frank, "It's blacker 'an a stack of niggers down here."

Frank hurriedly passed him down the light, and then resumed his watch at the window.

By the aid of the candle Nat began to examine his surroundings. He was in a narrow cellar about eight feet long by four in width, inclosed by walls of rock built without mortar. These he found could be easily removed, and turning to the side next to the ravine, he commenced to remove the stones and place them in the opening behind him. Presently he caught the gleam of a star between the rocks.

He could hardly suppress the cry of joy that rose to his lips. Only a few moments' work now and the passage to the outside would be opened.

He was just in the act of communicating this welcome intelligence to his companion, when the candle, which had burned to the end sputtered and went out, leaving him in total darkness.

At that same instant he heard the voice of Frank, at the hole above calling to him in an excited whisper.

"What is it?" asked Nat, groping his way over the loose rocks.

"The guard is coming this way," replied Frank, in a cautious whisper.

The sound of footsteps could be plainly heard, approaching the jail. Suddenly they ceased. Then came the sound of a key turning in the rusty lock.

Then, with a noiseless step, Frank approached the partition door, and crouching there in the darkness, made ready to spring upon the guard should he enter the room.

Nat Barker had anticipated his friend's action, and was drawing himself up through the hole in the floor as noiselessly as possible.

But, at this juncture, they heard steps in the room beyond. Then all was silent. For a half minute the two men held their breath and listened. Presently the steps withdrew from the room; the door closed; the key turned in the lock, and they heard retreating footsteps.

Frank stole to the window and looked out. He saw the dark figure of a man moving swiftly in the direction of the town. Frank watched the figure until it had disappeared, then turned from the window.

"He is gone," he cried, drawing a breath of relief.

"Good!" ejaculated Nat, in an excited whisper "and so shall we be, in a few moments. I've got an openin' almost completed, but the light is out, and we'll have to work in the dark."

"What?" exclaimed Frank, in astonishment; "do you mean to say you have found a way out?"

"You've said it, pardner! Jist foller me, and I'll soon show you."

In a few moments both men had dropped into the cellar below, and groping their way over the loose rocks, they reached the wall and commenced removing the loose stones with a will.

The moon was just rising, and its faint beams stealing through the crevices in the wall, enabled them to progress rapidly with their work. In a very few moments a hole of sufficient size to admit their bodies had been made. Then Nat crawled to the outside, and found himself in the small ravine under the eastern wall of the jail. Frank quickly joined him, and the two prisoners were free!

"What next?" questioned Frank.

"Foller me," answered Nat, and he led the way toward the low hills that lay east of the town.

They were ascending a little hill not three hundred yards from the jail, when they paused and glanced backward. A solemn stillness lay over the town. Their flight had not been discovered.

Suddenly the two men started back, a cry of horror upon their lips! A great tongue of livid flame had shot fully fifty feet above the jail, instantly followed by an appalling crash that shook the earth as if a hundred guns had been discharged at their very side. Then came darkness and the sound of falling rocks.

"My God!" gasped Frank, "the jail has been blown up!"

"Great Caesar!" ejaculated Nat, "what does that mean?"

For several moments the two men stood as if stupefied with horror and amazement.

"Nat," gasped Frank, in a hoarse voice, "that is the work of that devil, Mockton!"

"I believe you, my boy, and we ought to thank Heaven that we were not in the jail when that explosion took place."

"Amen!" responded Frank, in an awed voice.

"But listen! The whole town is alarmed!"

Plainly now could be heard the sound of excited voices and hurrying feet.

"Come! we must get out of this," urged Nat, "those devils will be after us as soon as our absence is discovered!"

"But, where can we go? It will soon be daylight, and we shall be captured again!"

"Come, we haven't a moment to lose!" and the two men ran with all speed in the direction of Nat's cabin.

"It is no use; we shall never be able to make our escape," declared Frank, as they reached the cabin and entered, almost out of breath.

"It looks perty bilious," admitted Nat, "but, I've got a plan—"

"Then let us act upon it at once," exclaimed Frank. "We have no time to lose."

"Correct, my boy. Now listen!

And in a few words Nat unfolded his plan of action.

Frank uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Do you agree to it?" asked Nat.

"I do," responded Frank. "It is our only chance."

The greatest excitement prevailed in Desert City the next morning. A crowd of angry and excited citizens had gathered about the ruined jail, discussing the startling events.

That the suspected parties had escaped and then blown up the jail, was the verdict, and if

there had been a doubt as to the guilt of the prisoners, it was now utterly dissipated. There were two men in Desert City, however, who fully believed that when the debris of the ruined jail should be removed, the dead bodies of the two prisoners would be found beneath; but it is hardly necessary to state that Mockton and the city marshal kept this opinion to themselves.

"It's a plain case," observed Mockton, "that the prisoners were guilty. My idea was to string them up as soon as they were caught."

"That is just what should have been done," assented the city marshal, who had just returned from the hills on a pretended search for the fugitives.

"But, where could they have gone to?" questioned Mockton. "Every part of the surrounding country has been searched, but not a trace of them has been found."

"And that isn't the worst of it," added Jack Neal, the proprietor of the Montezuma Hotel; "they have already committed another robbery while we have been searching for them."

"The deuce you say!" ejaculated the marshal in astonishment.

"It's a fact," averred the landlord. "A couple of prospectors reached here about daylight, and it seems that they were met and robbed on the Tombstone road, not three miles from the town. There was two of the robbers, and it must have been the two escaped prisoners."

"That's a different tone to what you used last night!" blurted Mockton. "You were one of the idiots that believed the prisoners were Sunday-school superintendents!"

"I only told what I knew about one of the prisoners," faltered the landlord. "He claimed to be a son to the Hammond that owns the big ranch across the mountains, and it did seem as if he was what he pretended."

"Seem, the devil! You didn't know anything about either of these Hammonds. You'd better keep your mouth shut after this!" replied Mockton, savagely.

"Where are these two strangers who were robbed?" asked the marshal.

"Down at the hotel," responded the landlord.

"Well, I will go down and see them. They may furnish some clew as to the whereabouts of the fugitives."

With this the marshal led the way to the hotel, followed by an eager mob.

They found the two strangers at the hotel, surrounded by a little knot of citizens, who were busy discussing the robbery.

The strangers were dressed in the garb usually worn by prospectors, and appeared greatly excited over their recent loss. The older of the two could not have been less than sixty years of age, judging by his white hair and yellow face, while his companion might have been a score of years younger, and possessed a bushy red beard that almost covered his face.

"Gentlemen," said the marshal, approaching, and addressing the strangers, "I have just been told that you were robbed on the Tombstone road this morning. I am the city marshal, and am anxious to bring the villains to justice. Perhaps you can give me some clew that will lead to their capture."

The older of the two prospectors shook his head.

"I wish I could tell ye whar ye could put yer han's on 'em, but I reckon they aire meckin' tracks many miles from hyar 'fore this."

"How many were they?"

"We only see'd two, though thar might 'a' b'en a dozen hidin' in the bushes an' rocks."

"Can you describe them?"

"Wal, they wore masks, and I didn't git much uv a peep at 'em. It was dark, an' it all happened so sudden like."

"Where were you at the time?"

"We war camped 'bout three miles from hyar on the Tombstone road."

"Do you live at Tombstone?"

"Ken't say that I do, though I've b'en knockin' 'round thar consider'ly. We'd b'en out prospectin'—me an' Jim Fits thar, an' had got a little dust, an' war comin' in ter Desert City ter injoy ourselves when them on'ry cusses beld us up fer our pile—that is most uv it, but thar's a little left that they didn't find, enough ter buy some guns to go in s'arch uv the blasted rascals with. If we run across 'em thar won't be no trial—we'll jist bore 'em through an' let the kites hold the inquest."

"A good plan," decided the marshal. "Now what's your names?"

"Fits an' Hunter," replied the old man, "Jim Fits an' Zeke Hunter, prospectors; perm'nent address, Tombstone," and the old man uttered a low, chuckling laugh.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW SENSATION.

THE two prisoners stood scarcely breathing as they heard the outer door swing open.

"All right," returned the marshal; "if we capture the rascals we'll see that you get your dust back, if we find it in their possession."

"Thank ye—thank ye," responded the old chap; "will be ever so much obleeged ter ye if ye do."

The marshal then withdrew. At the Desert Fountain he met Mockton, and drawing him aside, said:

"Some boy has robbed the two men at the hotel, and the question is who did it?"

"That's just what's been puzzling me," admitted Mockton.

"Of course, the people think it was the two prisoners, but, we know better. I reckon ghosts don't do any robbing," and the marshal gave vent to a low laugh.

"It must have been some of the men," ventured Mockton.

"But, they had no orders?"

"No; that is what puzzles me. I must inquire into the matter as soon as possible."

The following day men were set to work removing the rubbish, preparatory to repairing the shattered jail. Mockton and the marshal were on the ground, and when the debris had all been removed, and no trace of the supposed mangled prisoners had been found, the two men looked at each other, speechless with astonishment. A moment later they discovered the hole in the floor of the jail through which the prisoners had escaped.

With looks of baffled rage upon their faces, Mockton and the marshal turned and walked in the direction of the town.

"Curse us for idiots!" hissed Mockton, "we have failed, and that devil is free again!"

"Yes, and we have lost all chance of overtaking them," answered the marshal. "If we had only known this at first—"

"But, we didn't," broke in Mockton. "We must warn Merto and the men at once. We have made a fools' job of the whole thing."

"Mockton," said the marshal, suddenly, "I have just been thinking about the two men at the hotel who were robbed."

"Well?"

"I believe their whole story was made up."

"For what purpose?"

"To keep us from suspecting who they were."

"What! you don't think?"

"Yes—it was the two prisoners in disguise as sure as you are living!"

"You are right!" he cried, his voice hoarse with baffled rage. "They have duped us; but, come! they may be in town yet—they think we will suspect nothing."

Swiftly the two hurried to the hotel. But they discovered that the two strangers had left town, the landlord informed them. They had purchased some arms, a couple of horses late the evening before, and had left with the expressed determination to hunt the robbers down; but, whether they had gone to put this determination into effect or had simply returned to Tombstone, none could say.

CHAPTER VII.

A MARVEL!

As the reader has already surmised, the two strangers who arrived in Desert City, claiming to have been robbed were none other than Nat Barker and Frank Hammond.

Finding it would be impossible for them to escape, Nat had hit upon the plan of returning to Desert City under disguise, thus throwing their enemies off their guard. The suits worn by the two men were the discarded garments of some prospector who had inhabited the little cabin before Nat's arrival. These they had hastily slipped on over their own clothes. Then from an inside pocket of his coat, Nat produced the false beard and wigs worn by them on their return to Desert City.

How well their ruse worked, the reader has already seen.

Having procured arms and a couple of Mexican ponies, they set out once more for Hammond's ranch. By daylight the following morning, they had entered a spur of the Sierra Madre Mountains, where they halted for the day, now feeling secure from pursuit.

Barker and young Hammond lay under the shadow of a small tree, while a short distance away their two ponies were industriously cropping the short grass at the end of the *riatas*.

Near at hand a small spring bubbled up from among the loose rocks, and stealing down its narrow, rocky channel, sent up a murmur on the sultry air.

To the north towered a long chain of cliffs, fringed with stunted cedars, while beyond rose

the barren summits of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Southward stretched a succession of jagged peaks, whose sun-scorched and blackened rocks seemed fresh from some volcanic fire. From east to west lay a narrow, winding canyon, dark and deep, where scarcely a ray of sunlight ever fell. This is known as Urkos Pass.

Frank Hammond had removed the false beard worn at Desert City, but Barker still wore the disguise he had employed in the character of Zeke Hunter at the hotel the day before.

"Nat," said Frank, breaking the silence, "there is one thing that's been puzzling me."

"What is that?" asked Nat.

"Regarding the blowing up of the jail."

"Maybe Mockton had a hand in it."

"That is likely. He could easily have murdered us, I am quite sure; but, it was not he who did it."

"I know it wasn't," was the calm reply.

"That is the most puzzling part of the whole business."

"Then you suspect some one else of having done the deed?"

Nat nodded.

"You believe it was the guard, then?" queried Frank.

"Yes."

"That is my opinion; but Mockton must have planned it."

"He's the onery cuss that set the trap; there ain't no doubt about that; but, here is the point: the guard done the work when he came in the jail just before we escaped."

"Exactly; that is the conclusion I have arrived at."

"Now, the question is, how did he get the officers to go into the plot? They ain't got no reason to want us out of the way, while there are reasons to believe that Mockton has."

"There is a mystery behind it all," averred Frank, "and there is a greater set of villains in Desert City than has been dreamed of by most of its inhabitants."

"You're right, my boy, and some day there's goin' to be a big roundin'-up there—jist see if there ain't!"

Suddenly a look of alarm swept over Nat's face as he sat gazing idly across the narrow canyon, though not a sound came from his lips. Only for an instant did his countenance betray the slightest emotion, then it was calm again. Presently he spoke in a low tone, without looking at his companion:

"Don't you move till I give the word. We are in deadly peril. *We are surrounded by Apaches; if you make a false move we are lost.* Now, when I give the word, grab your gun and run to the north side of the canyon, and drop behind the big boulders. Then don't waste a shot!"

Frank Hammond was thunderstruck with surprise, though well he knew the danger of betraying himself by any suspicious movement, and without even glancing at his companion, he replied:

"I am ready."

"Now!"

The word had scarcely left Nat's lips when both men, grasping their rifles that lay in easy reach, sprang to their feet like a flash and darted across the canyon.

But, scarcely had they taken a dozen steps when a chorus of savage yells broke the stillness, and from rock and bush, a score of Apaches rose as if by magic, and darted in pursuit.

The fugitives heard the report of firearms behind, and a dozen bullets whistled about them. But, in a few moments, they had reached the mass of huge boulders near the north side of the canyon, and leaping across these, they quickly threw themselves behind the sheltering wall. The next instant the muzzles of their Winchester appeared over the rocks, followed by simultaneous reports, and two of the advancing savages went down with the death cry on their lips.

With howls of baffled rage, the whole gang of reds swerved to one side and took refuge behind the rocks, knowing that it would be death to face the two desperate men, intrenched as they were behind an impenetrable fortification.

"There's two of the cusses that won't bother us again," observed Nat, grimly; "but, I reckon we're in a mighty tight-box."

"So we are!" returned Frank. "Let us keep a sharp lookout, and make ever shot count."

Silence now reigned over the gloomy pass. The sun had gone behind the towering cliffs that rose perpendicularly for over 100 feet above them. The canyon at this point was not over

twenty rods wide, and it was only during a short portion of the day that the sunlight penetrated its gloomy depths.

Cautiously Nat peered from behind the rocks, through the foliage of a bunch of mesquite bushes, that lined the front; but failed to catch a glimpse of the foe, though well he knew they were hidden in the rocks not sixty yards away.

Slowly the hours passed, but not a sound broke the stillness to indicate the presence of any human being in the canyon, save the two men who lay there, clutching their weapons, waiting for the attack.

"Nat," whispered Frank, "what does it mean? There has been no sound for hours to indicate that the savages are in the canyon. Can it be that they have crept away, and are gone?"

"Nary gone!" responded Nat. "Them Apache devils don't do that kind of business."

"Then you think they are still here?"

"I know it."

"Do you think they will attempt to starve us out?"

"No; that ain't their game; it's worse 'an that. They're waitin' for dark to come."

"I see now. Unless we can manage to escape them before they attack us, we are lost."

"It looks perty black for us, boy," admitted Nat, "but, there is jist one chance left."

"What is that?"

"They are goin' to wait till night before they attack us again. It will be nearly two hours yet."

"Yes."

"Well, we must try to git out of here before that!"

"But they are watching us, and any attempt on our part to leave this place will be sure to bring the whole pack down upon us."

"If they see us—yes; but they may not expect us to attempt an escape before dark, and if we could crawl up the canyon, we might be able to give 'em the slip around a turn in the cliff."

"But may they not be one guarding that point?"

"That's what I'm goin' to find out. Don't move till I tell you," and Nat began crawling cautiously up the canyon, keeping close to the base of the cliff.

Ten minutes passed, and Frank saw his companion returning.

"Tain't no use!" muttered Nat. "The red devils are all around us. We can't do nothin' but stan' our ground and fight it out. When it gits dark we've got to make a dash, and fight our way through their lines."

"Whenever you say the word, I am ready," responded Frank.

A silence fell between the two men that was only broken by the low murmur of the wind along the summit of the cliffs.

Presently the sun went down, and the dark shadows of night rapidly began gathering over the canyon.

The two men had examined their rifles, and filled the magazines with fresh cartridges.

"When I give the word dash up the canyon, and I will be by your side," whispered Nat.

They waited in breathless silence. Deeper and deeper grew the darkness about them; then—

Then came a succession of guttural ejaculations from the darkness across the narrow pass.

In a moment the two men were on their feet, expecting the red horde to swarm about them; when, suddenly a gleam of red light flashed through the darkness, followed by strange, startled cries of terror from the savages, and the next moment, as if moved with a common impulse, the whole Apache band rushed headlong down the canyon!

Nat Barker and Frank Hammond stood as if thunderstruck with astonishment.

What had happened to cause the panic among the savages? Neither of the two men could answer the question.

The sound of the terror-stricken Apaches could be heard far down the canyon, as they rushed pell-mell through the lush and over the jagged rocks.

"Great Christopher Columbus!" ejaculated Nat, "what in the name of all that's mysterious did them devils git scared at? 'Pears like they must 'a' got a glimpse of the Ole Feller himself."

"Look!" cried Frank, suddenly. "What in the name of Heaven does that mean?"

A strange red light had suddenly flamed up along the summit of the towering cliff, casting a ruddy glow down into the gloomy depths of the pass. Then it disappeared, and all was darkness.

With ejaculations of astonishment the two men stole cautiously across the canyon.

"Come, Frank," whispered Nat, "let us git

out of here. There's some deviltry afoot in this place."

"Which way shall we go?" asked Frank.

"There's a place a little ways down the cliff where we can climb out of here," returned Nat, and the two men stole cautiously forward through the darkness.

A few steps brought them to the place where their horses had been picketed. They were gone.

"The cussed varments have left us afoot," hissed Nat, "but I reckon even that is better 'an bein' scalped and burnt at the stake."

Again the red light fell over the pass, and turning about, they beheld a strange spectacle.

Upon the summit of the cliff a dull red light was streaming over the jagged rocks, and within the circle of the glow stood the dark figure of a monster in human shape—something resembling a man in form, but so completely covered with long, black hair, and of such weird and hideous aspect, as to fill the stoutest heart with fear. Near this strange monster stood a white human skeleton, its long bony hands stretched out toward the valley below as if imparting a hideous warning to all who might venture within the rocky walls of that gloomy pass.

The next moment the light vanished, and the blackness of night lay over the great canyon.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROBBER QUEEN.

"WHAT in the name of ole Tom Walker was that?" gasped Nat, hardly crediting his senses. "It looks as if the Ole Boy himself had taken possession of this place!"

"That beats anything I ever witnessed," declared Frank, in astonishment.

"What can it mean?" queried Nat in an awed voice.

"I'll be hanged if you haven't got me," declared Frank. "I can't imagine what it can be, unless it is some one who is seeking to frighten us away."

"But who'd want to be doin' that?"

"I can't tell. At any rate, whatever it is, it has served us a good turn by frightening the reds out of their senses, and I'm not going to grumble."

"Correct. And now let's be gittin' out of this. We've got a long tramp before us, and the sooner we're on the road the better."

For nearly a quarter of a mile the two men traveled along the base of the cliff before they reached a point where they could ascend to the table-land above.

Having accomplished this with great difficulty, they set out on their journey, taking an eastern course as near as they could guess.

The night being intensely dark, it was with the greatest difficulty they made their way over the rough path.

Hour after hour they trudged wearily on. It must have been two o'clock when, suddenly, they arrived at the edge of a great precipice. Not an instant too soon did they discover their danger. Another step and they would have been precipitated into the black depths below.

The two men recoiled, a cold shiver running through them as they realized the deadly peril they had been in.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Frank, as they drew back from the precipice. "We must have lost our way."

"That's about the size of it," admitted Nat. "I've been through these hills before, but don't remember jist where this place is. If we have traveled straight East, I can't see why we hain't got out of the hills long before this. We've lost our way, boy, shore as shootin'."

"What is to be done then? We can't go on."

"I reckon we'd better not try. It ain't long till daylight, and we'll jist wait till we can see our way."

"I won't mind taking a little rest, myself," declared Frank. "I'm about used up trampin' over these rocks."

The two men threw themselves on the short grass and were soon asleep.

It was broad daylight when they awoke, and prepared to resume their journey.

Nat approached the precipice and looked into the deep canyon below. Then he gazed at the hills about them—the tall summits of the mountains lying to the north, a look of astonishment sweeping over his countenance.

"Frank," he said, suddenly, turning to his companion. "I'll be hanged if we ain't back at Urkos Pass—and after travelin' most of the night to git away!"

Frank looked surprised.

"It's a fact," went on Nat. "We must 'a' got

turned around somehow in the dark, and traveled back to where we started."

"You are right," admitted Frank; "we've had the night's tramp for nothing, but it can't be helped now."

Suddenly Nat caught his companion's arm, and pointing across the hill, exclaimed:

"Look!"

Frank glanced in the direction indicated and saw a large, low building with gray walls half covered with clinging vines, only a short distance away, half hidden in a grove of cedars.

Quickly the two men approached the building, and as they did so, they discovered that it was an old ruin—of Aztec or Toltic creation, such as are sometimes found in the wild regions of Arizona and Mexico. It was a long, narrow structure, a row of broken stone columns standing near the wall which had evidently once supported a veranda. The door was open, and as they drew near they saw that the shutter, which was evidently of recent construction, was made of long mesquite poles, standing vertically and held into place by cross-bars of same material.

The walls, which were composed of a grayish cement and blocks of stone, were crumbling with age.

As the two men entered this building they saw unmistakable evidences of recent occupancy. A few cooking utensils were scattered here and there about the room, and in one corner a pile of ashes showed where a fire had been. The walls and ceilings were of a hard, smooth cement finish, while the floor was composed of great square blocks of stone, fitted closely together.

The house contained three rooms, but there was only one door leading from the outside. Nat and Frank passed from one room to the other through the open doorways, and although they discovered unmistakable evidence of habitation, it was clear that the place had been abandoned by its late occupants.

Far a half-hour the two men remained in the strange old building. Then, as they emerged from its gloomy walls, they caught the sound of horses' hoofs coming across the hill.

In a moment Nat and Frank had concealed themselves in a thicket by the wall.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of approaching hoofs; then two horsemen appeared in sight. They were heavily armed and had their faces concealed by black masks.

A few moments and the horsemen had disappeared across the hill behind a clump of trees.

"Outlaws, or I'm a liar!" gasped Nat, in a low tone, "and I'll be chawed by a grizzly if they hain't got their rendezvous somewhere in these parts."

"You are right, and that may account for the strange sight we witnessed last night. They evidently wish to frighten every spy away and have taken that means of doing so."

"It may be as you say. Anyway, I'm sure Merto, the Robber Queen, and her band of cut-throats and road-agents are in these hills!"

"Merto, the Robber Queen? I have heard of her," responded Frank. "They say she is a desperate character, and that she and Red Rufus the outlaw are in league."

Nat nodded his head.

"She is a devil in human shape!" he hissed, a ferocious light gleaming in his eyes. "But, some fellers call her perty. Maybe she is. I've been wantin' to see her fer a long time," and he laughed a low, mirthless laugh.

"You have seen her, then?" queried Frank, in surprise.

"Yes, I have seen her," and Nat nodded his head in an emphatic manner.

"I have heard that she has baffled the skill of all the detectives and officers, and as she is still at large, there must be some truth in this report."

"Yes," answered Nat, "she's managed things perty slick. She escaped several times when they thought they had her cornered."

"I heard in Desert City that Maverick Mose, the great Arizona Detective, was still on her track, though he failed to capture her at Tombstone, after having caught a member of her gang."

"Yes, she left there with Red Rufus, I heard 'em say."

"And he is still with her, I suppose?"

"Yes, but he's got a different name, now."

"What is it?"

"Bill Mockton."

Frank started up, an exclamation of surprise falling from his lips.

"Are you sure of this?"

"Sure as I'm livin'," responded Nat.

"When did you find t'is out?"

"When he took us to jail. I saw he had false whiskers; then I knew he was Red Rufus. I had suspected him before, but I am now convinced."

"Then let us return to Desert City and demand him, and have him locked up before he escapes!" cried Frank, excitedly.

Nat shook his head.

"Young feller," he responded, "I see that you lack judgment. Can't you see what a mess we'd meck of the hull thing if we'd do as you suggest? Who's goin' to testify against him? Would they take our word for it if we told them he was Red Rufus? I reckon not! Hain't we already looked on as robbers? Didn't we break jail there? No; I ain't ready to go to Desert City jist yit."

"I see that you are right," admitted Frank. "I understand the situation; but, what is to be done? Surely you don't intend to let that villain run at large, knowing what you do?"

"Time enough yit. Then I have got another idea—if we captured Red Rufus, we'd miss gettin' the Robber Queen, and that is jist the main p'int."

"I can see now why it was that Mockton was so anxious to have us convicted of the crime of which we were accused. He is indeed a villain of the most desperate and dangerous type."

"He is that. His gang of cut-throats have got a rendezvous somewhere in this region, and I mean to find it before I leave this place."

"What! you mean to say that you are going to undertake this dangerous task without assistance?"

Nat nodded his head.

"But, let us go to the ranch and get a dozen cowboys and return. What can we two accomplish against a dozen or a score of such men as we'll have to deal with?"

"I see that you don't understand my plan. What I'm goin' to do now is to locate the game, and capture it when the sign is right. I'm not goin' to put my head in any hornets' nest. But with a dozen men with me, what could I do? Simply alarm the robbers and put 'em on their guard, and lose the game entirely."

Frank held out his hand.

"Whatever danger there is to encounter in this undertaking," he said, "remember I am with you. And if you are willing, we will undertake the task of locating the robbers at once."

The two men shook hands warmly.

"Nough said!" responded Nat. "There ain't a man in Arizony I'd rather have for my pardner than yourself—"

The sound of horses' feet came from across the hill.

The two men grasped their guns more tightly, and peered eagerly in the direction from whence the noise had proceeded.

Suddenly a horse dashed across the hill a hundred yards away, bearing on his back the form of a female, a mass a raven hair falling about her shapely shoulders. A red cap, ornamented with a white plume, surmounted her head, while a broad sash of scarlet silk was tied about her waist.

For one brief moment the two men stood speechless with surprise; then the horse and rider had disappeared across the hill, into the ravine beyond.

"By the shader of ole Christopher Columbo!" gasped Nat, "I'm of liar and can't see if that ain't Merto, the Robber Queen!"

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE MUZZLE OF A WINCHESTER.

"THE Robber Queen!" ejaculated Frank. "Then let us follow her at once, and discover the outlaws' rendezvous!" and Frank made a step as if to start in pursuit of the rider.

Nat laid a detaining hand upon him.

"Don't be in too big a hurry!" he advised. "We have a set of cunnin' rascals to deal with, and this may be a trap to draw us into an ambush."

"But, do you suppose our presence in the hills has been discovered by the outlaws?" questioned Frank.

"I am afraid so. That sight we witnessed last night makes me think they knew of our presence; still, it might 'a' been for the benefit of them savages."

"It looks, then, as if the outlaws would attack us if they knew we were here," responded Frank.

"They might and then they mightn't. They may have seen us and think we are only prospectors, and don't want to tackle us if we don't bother 'em."

"We must keep on the lookout, at any rate," returned Frank.

"Pardner," said Nat, "I'm going on a little reconnoissance, and see what I can discover. Jist keep quiet till I come back, and—"

"But I shall go with you, you may get into trouble and need my assistance."

"No; it'll only meck matters worse for you to be with me. I'll keep my eyes open and won't let any one git the drop on me. You must stay here till I come back."

"Well, just as you think best. How long will you be gone?"

"Only a little while—an hour or two."

With this Nat started across the hill, and was soon lost to sight behind the big rocks.

Nat followed the trail of the Robber Queen for nearly a mile; then he found that the trail made by the two robbers and the one he was following merged into one. A little further on he discovered that it led into the deep canyon below, through a narrow winding ravine.

Having reached the bottom of the pass, he followed the trail around the base of a towering cliff for a quarter of a mile, keeping the closest watch that he did not betray his presence by the slightest sound or exposure.

Threading his way through a narrow passage, he emerged into a little valley, surrounded by perpendicular cliffs, and covered with a scant growth of brush, with here and there a few scattering trees.

At this moment he caught the sound of voices around an angle in the high cliff, and had scarcely time to conceal himself behind a bunch of chaparral bushes, when two men came in sight, walking directly toward the spot where he lay.

They were villainous-looking specimens of the roughest element, and were armed with rifles and heavy pistols.

Nat lay flat on the ground as they approached, peering at them through an opening in the thicket. That it would be impossible for him to avoid discovery, Nat now felt certain, and nerving himself for action, he was about to rise from his place of concealment, when the two changed their course, going in the direction of the cliff.

They passed within a rod of Nat, and paused at the base of the cliff, not thirty yards away.

A few trees, and a dense thicket of chaparral grew against the rocky wall, almost hiding it from view.

One of the men gave vent to a low whistle, and instantly the foliage in front of them parted, and the form of a man, armed with a Winchester, appeared in the opening.

That these men were members of the Robber Queen's gang, Nat was now fully convinced.

"What news?" inquired the man at the entrance.

"We must be ready to make another demand on the traveling public a week from to-night," replied one of the two, with a coarse laugh.

"What part of the judicial circuit?"

"On the Tombstone road."

"Where's the captain?"

"In town," with a motion toward Desert City.

"When will he visit us?"

"To-night, if nothing happens."

"How many men has he ordered to make the next haul?"

"Six or seven."

"Seven will only leave two to guard the castle, if two are sent to Tucson as was decided at our last meeting."

"You forget Merto."

"Well, three—then. That will be a big risk to run. Suppose a party of officers should discover our den? We'd then run a chance of losing a fortune for an uncertainty."

"You are right, but the captain has promised to keep us posted, and he'll do it."

"When did you leave Desert City?"

"Four days ago—the day we made the last haul. We had to travel a long ways around to cover our trail here. It was the captain's orders."

"Then you have not heard the news?"

"No; what is it?"

"We received word yesterday from the captain that Maverick Mose was in Desert City."

"The deuce!"

"And he was captured by the captain and the marshal and held, accused of robbing the stage."

"Good! He will not bother us again!"

"But he has escaped!"

A furious imprecation escaped the outlaw.

"And have they discovered nothing of him?"

"Nothing."

"That is a fine mess. Did the captain give any particulars?"

"No; he said the detective had been in his

hands, but had escaped. There is a young man with him who calls himself Hammond. We are to keep the sharpest lookout for them."

"Correct! If we find them, there won't be any escape."

"That's whatever. Are you coming in?"

"Not just yet. We'll wait here till the other boys come up from the ravine where we left our horses."

The man at the opening now disappeared, leaving the other two on the outside, seated on a huge boulder, in the shadow of the overhanging cliff.

It was evident that the two robbers intended to remain in the present position for some time, and a sense of uneasiness began to steal over Nat as he recognized this fact. It was possible that he might be compelled to remain for hours in his unpleasant position, with scarcely a twig above him to furnish protection from the scorching sun.

To attempt to leave his place of concealment, unobserved by the two robbers, would be useless. That they were robbers he had now received ample proof in what he had overheard. Even should he remain where he was, there was a chance of his being discovered.

What was to be done?

He must remain silent and wait till an opportunity to escape presented itself.

A half-hour passed; then there came the sound of voices, proceeding from down the canyon, and the next moment three more men came into sight.

At this, Nat Barker, who was still lying in his place of concealment, recognized his peril. He would certainly be discovered. Flight would be useless, since he could not escape from the canyon before he would be overtaken. To be caught in his present position would instantly stamp him as a spy, and it required no stretch of imagination to guess what his fate would be if discovered. That these men were the most desperate characters in Arizona, he well knew.

But, there was no time to be lost. In two minutes more he would be discovered. Suddenly a thought came to him. It was a desperated one, but he had no choice. Quickly he rose to his feet, and walked slowly toward the two outlaws, his gun thrown carelessly across his shoulder.

"Hello thar, pardners!" saluted Nat, in a hearty tone, as he approached.

In a moment the two men had sprung to their feet, and stood confronting the new-comer with leveled weapons.

"Tick kear!" cautioned Nat, "What the doose do ye mean by p'intin' them things at me? Think I'm a varment or a robber? I ain't goin' ter hurt ye."

"Who are you? and what do you want?" demanded one of the ruffians, savagely.

"What do I want? I want a chaw terbacker, but blamed if ye air goin' ter take it so hard I'll wait till I git back ter Tucson!"

"Who are you?" repeated the outlaw, sternly.

"Pardner," said Nat, halting and surveying the men before him, "don't you think yere jist a leetle fresh?"

"No foolishness old man!" blurted the outlaw; "who are you? and what is your business here?"

"Wal, I don't mind tellin' my name bein' yer so confounded perticular about it. They call me Dave Armstrong up at Tucson, but Ole Dave's good enough fer me."

"What are you doing here?"

"Wal, I'm talkin' ter a dinged fool right now, I reckon," returned Nat with a comical grin.

"Look here, you old idiot!" cried the outlaw, "if you don't keep a more civil tongue I'll crack your head with this gun-barrel."

An injured look came into Nat's face.

"Say, pardner, do you own these mountains?" he queried, in a squeaky voice.

"You'll think we do before we get through with you, if you don't change your tone."

"Ain't I jist as civil as ye aire? Ye're the one that's doin' the sassy talkin'."

At this moment the three men whom Nat had observed came up.

"What's up?" asked one of the new arrivals, casting a suspicious glance at Nat.

"We've jist discovered this old coon prowling around here. Do you know who he is?"

"Don't know him from Moses," was the reply.

"Gentlemen," broke in Nat, addressing the men who had just come up, "have ye got any terbacker? I jist axed these fellers fer a chaw, an' hanged if they didn't want me ter tell 'em whar I was born an' give a history of Arizony. A purty way ter treat a neighbor prospector,"

and Nat seated himself on a boulder, and mopped the perspiration from his brow with a large colored handkerchief.

The robbers exchanged glances.

It was evident that they were mystified by the stranger's actions.

Their first impression had been that he was a spy, but the apparent indifference of his manner puzzled them.

Presently one of the outlaws said:

"Boys, we can't be too careful. We're hard-working miners, and have got a little dust, so it stands us in hand to take care of it. There's robbers in these parts, I've heard, and how do we know this old chap ain't one of 'em, sent to spy out our camp?"

"I reckon we'd better hold him till the boss comes," suggested another.

"That's my idea."

"And mine," echoed another.

Then one of the robbers turned to Nat and said:

"Give me your arms. You are my prisoner. You must remain with us till we are satisfied as to who you are."

With this remark he approached Nat, and took his gun and pistols, Nat offering no resistance.

One of the outlaws then motioned one of the others to follow him, and the two withdrew a short distance from the rest.

"Does he know of the cave?" asked one.

"No; I think not," was the reply.

"Then he must not be enlightened."

"Where shall we keep him?"

"There is an old deserted log hut up the canyon two miles from here."

"Yes; I know where it is."

"Well, we must send him up there in charge of two men, with orders to hold him till the captain comes."

"That will do."

The two returned to the spot where they had left their companions, and taking the weapons that belonged to Nat, one of them addressed a swarthy-skinned Spaniard.

"Jose," he said, passing the arms to the Spaniard, "you and Jake take the prisoner up to the old cabin in the canyon and hold him till further orders. We think he is a spy. The captain will be here to-night."

The two men addressed as Jake and Jose advanced and motioned for Nat to move up the canyon.

He obeyed in silence, knowing that resistance would only serve to put his captors upon their guard. His only hope of escape now lay in the chance of catching the two men who were guarding him off their guard. He would make no attempt till he was alone with them. Well Nat knew that, when they spoke of the "captain," they referred to Mockton. Nat fully recognized the fact that if he should be held a prisoner until the robber chief's arrival he was doomed. Mockton would recognize him;—of this he had not the slightest doubt. He must watch his chance and make a desperate attempt to escape.

Once Nat glanced backward, but met the muzzles of two rifles, followed by a warning not to attempt escape if he valued his life.

Nat marched on in silence, his thoughts working rapidly. Where was Frank Hammond? There was a chance that he might come to the rescue. But more likely he would remain at the old house waiting for his comrade's return.

They had now traveled over a mile, and had entered a narrow pass, with towering cliffs on either side.

Suddenly there came a cry from one of the men behind.

Nat turned, and, as he did so, he saw one of the outlaws reel and fall backward, the blood gushing from a bullet-hole in his breast. Yet there had been no report of any kind of fire-arms!

Jose the Spaniard stood as if stupefied for one brief moment, a look of horror on his swarthy face; then with a furious anathema he leveled his rifle at Nat Barker's breast.

CHAPTER X.

FRANK'S STRANGE ADVENTURE.

FOR a long time after Nat's departure, Frank Hammond lay in the shadows of the mesquite bushes, idly gazing across the rocky cliff that skirted the canyon.

What if some accident should befall his companion, in his absence? In spite of his promise to remain in concealment until Nat's return, Frank felt strongly inclined to follow him. That the outlaws had their rendezvous near the place, he was fully satisfied.

It was nearly noon when he arose from his recumbent position and glanced impatiently about him. Surely something had happened to detain Nat. As the time went by and he did not return, Frank became more and more convinced that his comrade had got into trouble; and, filled with apprehension at this thought, he resolved to go in search of him.

Rifle in hand, he stole cautiously in the direction taken by Nat. Four hours he wandered through the ravines and over hills without finding any trace of his pard. Suddenly it occurred to him that Nat might have returned in his absence. Acting upon this thought, he turned to retrace his steps. He had not proceeded far when he was startled by the sound of approaching hoofs. He had barely time to conceal himself behind a clump of bushes when he saw the feathered heads of a score of mounted Apaches appear above the hill and come directly toward his place of concealment.

In a moment Frank recognized the fact that to remain in his present position would but result in his discovery. His only hope of escape lay in immediate retreat; but which way should he go? He was standing on the very edge of the precipice that overhung the great canyon below, and retreat in that direction was completely cut off. He glanced hurriedly about him. He might escape by stealing along the edge of the cliff until a place of concealment could be found.

Stooping low behind the bushes, he began a hurried retreat. Close behind him he could hear the tramp of horses' feet. For a quarter of a mile he traveled—managing to keep ahead of the advancing savages; but now, as he glanced ahead, he made the startling discovery that if he continued his course, he must soon cross a bare waste of shrubless hill. To attempt this would be to invite discovery. There was only one course left, and that was to descend the cliff. If he could do this he might escape the eyes of the red raiders.

In a moment he had crept to the verge of the precipice and peered over. A feeling of despair took possession of him.

For nearly a hundred feet the precipice descended almost perpendicularly to a deep, narrow canyon. But on scanning the face of the cliff more closely he discovered a wide projection twelve or fifteen feet below. Not hesitating, he at once threw the strap of his gun about his shoulder, and commenced to descend, clinging desperately to the small projections as he went. He had not completed half the descent when finding no further hand-holds on the smooth wall, he relaxed his grip and dropped safely to the shelf below.

Pausing now to listen, he could plainly hear the sound of horses' feet passing along the summit of the cliff above his head. He shuddered as he realized his narrow escape.

Presently the sounds above died away, and a deathly stillness lay over the wild, desolate scenes.

A half-hour passed. The sun was low in the horizon. Deep shadows lay over the canyon.

Convinced now that the Apaches were no longer in the vicinity, Frank attempted to climb back to the top of the cliff. To his surprise and chagrin he was unable to do so. Again and again he made the attempt but failed. Then it occurred to him that he might descend to the bottom of the precipice and return to the hill by a circuitous route.

Following the shelf for several yards, he came to a wide, irregular cleft in the rocky wall, which descended in such a manner as to form a sort of rude stairway. Quickly availing himself of this, Frank began to make his way downward. It was all of eighty feet to the bottom of the canyon. He had completed three-fourths of this distance, when, losing his hold upon the now almost smooth wall, he reeled backward and fell with a crash through the branches of a small tree to the ground beneath, where he lay bruised and unconscious.

How long he remained in that state he could not tell. When he regained consciousness he beheld a pair of dark, lustrous eyes looking into his own, while the form of a lovely woman was kneeling by his side, bathing his face and hands with cool water.

For several moments Frank did not venture to speak, his whole being thrilled at the very touch of this strange woman. Her face was of the purest type; her complexion a clear olive; her movements as graceful as a panther's, and as queenly as Cleopatra.

She rose with a sigh of relief as she saw the light of consciousness return to his countenance, and stood leaning against the rocky wall, a strange light shining in her dark eyes, the soft-

tened glory of gathering twilight falling about her matchless form.

Frank lay like one entranced, not venturing to speak, lest the sound of his voice should dissolve the blissful vision.

Never until his dying day could he forget the picture she made as she stood there, her perfect form outlined against the jagged cliff. Her raven hair fell in profuse masses about her shapely shoulders, and as she had reached upward and laid her hand upon the rocky wall, the loose sleeve had fallen back, revealing her arm of ivory whiteness, and as perfect in its molding as if cast in ivory by some wizard sculptor of the hills.

"You feel better, I hope?" she said, in a low, musical voice, fixing her eyes upon the unlucky Frank.

"Yes—yes, thanks to your kindness," he replied, raising himself to a sitting posture. "It was awkward of me to fall down here."

"Were you alone?" she asked.

"Yes; I was attempting to descend the cliff to escape the Apaches when I fell. But, are you not in danger here, alone?"

"I am not alone," she answered, and as Frank glanced toward her, he saw her cast a glance toward the thicket near by as if expecting some one to appear.

Then, for the first time, the startling thought came to him that this strange beauty was *Merto, the Robber Queen!*

A shudder passed over his frame; he covered his face with his hands, a moan escaping his lips.

In a moment she had hastened to his side and was bending over him.

"You are badly hurt," she said, her head almost against his own, while she held a cup of water to his lips. He drank eagerly.

"I am better now, but how shall I ever repay your kindness?"

He staggered to his feet as he spoke, and stood before her, a strange, throbbing sensation at his heart, his whole soul drinking in her loveliness.

She drew back and stood against the wall, looking more supremely beautiful than ever, the dark splendor of her eyes shining through the gathering dusk.

"You must go, then," with a sudden lifting of her hand.

He stood looking at her in a half-dazed manner, but made no effort to move.

"Are you not going?" she asked, with a gesture of impatience. "You forget that you may be in great danger—that I have done wrong in shielding you. But humanity demanded it; I could not do less." She spoke hurriedly, her whole manner betraying excitement.

"I will go—since you command me—but it is not for fear of any danger that might threaten me if I remained—"

"And you will not betray me, now that I have trusted you?" appealingly, her voice betraying her emotion.

"Betray you! I betray you?" He stood looking at her as if spellbound. "Never!" He spoke almost fiercely, a touch of reproach in his voice.

"Something tells me that I can trust you," she said, in scarcely an audible voice. "Heaven help me if I have done wrong. Good-by."

He reached forth his hand to detain her, but she had vanished among the thick bushes that grew along the base of the cliff.

For several moments he stood there in the gathering darkness, as one turned to stone, then, without stopping to pick up his broken rifle that lay at his feet, he turned away like one in a dream, and walked down the canyon.

Night was fast coming, and overhead the pale stars gleamed in a cloudless sky.

Unmindful that unseen foes might be lurking in ever thicket—that he was surrounded by the most deadly dangers, he strode on, with only one thought in his brain, and that was—of the Robber Queen!

"It is no wonder that she has followers," he thought. "I could almost sacrifice everything to be in her presence; and yet, she is an adventuress—an accomplice of robbers and cut-throats—"

He threw out his hand with a gesture of infinite disgust at himself for his weakness. Yet, in the next breath, a change came over his face, and a tender feeling crept into his eyes.

"It's strange—very strange," he muttered. "Why should that woman lead such a life? There is some mystery here—a deep and black mystery. But will it ever be fathomed? Yes, I shall see her again," he went on, vehemently; "I will compel her to tell me the secret of her strange life—"

He stopped abruptly, as if about to carry his

thoughts into execution. Then he strode on. How far he had walked he did not know. But, suddenly the sound of voices warned him that some one was near.

Steps were approaching, and he had hardly time to seek the covert of the bushes when two men came into view.

They approached till within twenty yards of him, when they halted, close to the base of the steep cliff. One of them then gave a low whistle, and the next moment a man appeared in an opening in the thicket that grew against the rocky wall.

"Is it you, captain?" he asked.

"Yes; what's the news?"

Frank started at the sound of the last voice, and in an instant he recognized it as belonging to Bill Mockton!

"There was a suspicious character here today," answered the first speaker.

"The deuce! You did not let him go away?" cried Mockton.

"No."

"Is he here now?"

"He is up at the old cabin in the canyon, under guard."

"Then he did not discover our retreat?"

"I think not."

"What does he look like? Old or young?"

"Old, and is either half-fool or was playing a part."

"It's Maverick Mose, the Arizona Detective," cried Mockton, rubbing his hands with delight. "That's the biggest haul you ever made!"

Cries of astonishment came from the other two.

"And he is Maverick Mose!" one of them gasped.

"I could almost swear to it," replied Mockton. "Is he well guarded? If he escapes we are ruined."

"Two of our best men, Jake and Jose, are guarding him."

As Frank Hammond listened to these words the startling truth flashed across his mind. Nat Barker, the strange old man who had volunteered to guide him across the mountains, was none other than the great Arizona Detective, "Maverick Mose!" And Maverick Mose was now a captive in the hands of the outlaws, awaiting Mockton's arrival. Would he recognize the prisoner? Frank felt sure that he would, and, if so, Nat's doom would be sealed.

The three men had just started toward the opening when the sound of approaching footsteps broke the stillness.

The next moment the dark figure of a man came around an angle in the cliff. There came a sharp click-click of rifles, and then the voice of Mockton demanded:

"Who comes there?"

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE RESOLUTION.

WHEN Nat Barker saw the outlaw stagger and fall, slain by some invisible hand, and saw the muzzle of the rifle in the hands of the remaining outlaw leveled at his breast, he sprung quickly aside, aiming to avoid the shot and then to grapple with the desperado, but, before he could put this thought into execution, there was a hissing sound in the air; the Spaniard dropped the gun from his hand, and, with a low moan, sunk to the ground.

For one brief moment Nat stood as if paralyzed with astonishment; then, snatching up the rifle that had fallen from the Spaniard's hand, and securing his two pistols in the outlaw's belt, he darted into the nearest thicket. Pausing there a moment, he peered cautiously in every direction, but no sign of human presence was visible.

The high cliffs stood as silent as death, under the blazing sun, and not a breath of wind moved the hot, dust-laden leaves.

Although it was plain that the two robbers had been shot down at his very side, no report had broken the stillness.

"Well, that rather heads me off," mused Nat. "Who in creation could 'a' shot them and me not hear the gun? There's some mystery here I can't explain. But, whoever 'twas, it's done me a good turn, and I'm eternally obliged—that's certain!"

Then he thought of the strange creature and the skeleton he and Frank had seen the night before.

"Maybe it's the work of the Old Fellow himself," mused Nat; "but as it's helped me out of a mighty tight place, I'll thank even the devil himself. Now, I'll just get out while I can—"

With this he stole cautiously through the brush and down the valley. He had traveled but a short distance when he discovered a place

where he could ascend from the canyon, and he uttered a sigh of relief as he hurried across the hill toward where he had left Frank Hammond.

On reaching the place, he found that Frank had disappeared.

"It's strange, he muttered. "Something must 'a happened to the boy. Reckon he's got into trouble with some of the varmants."

For an hour he searched the surrounding thickets for his missing companion, but failed to find any trace of him or clew to the cause of his absence.

For hours he lingered about the place, with the hope that Frank had only gone away on a reconnoitering expedition, and would soon return. But he waited in vain.

Already the shadows of approaching night lay deep across ravine and canyon. No sound broke the stillness save the plaintive cry of the Mexican whip-poor-will which came from a neighboring thicket.

"Well, it beats all," muttered Nat. "I reckon I'll have to be trampin'. It won't do to stay here when the boy may be in trouble."

"Blast my cats!" he continued, "if there ain't some deep mystery about this whole business. What did that monster and that skeleton we saw last night mean? Who shot the two outlaws? It can't be the work of the outlaws themselves! Reckon they wouldn't be killin' each other jist to keep their hands in. Then, how was the shootin' done without makin' any sound? Gee whiz! it ain't no use to try to see into it. I guess the outlaws'll be surprised when they find that their prisoner's gone and the two guards shot. So Mr. Red Rufus'll be here to-night, will he? I reckon he'd 'a been glad to see me, but I couldn't afford to stay with his friends till he came—not much I couldn't."

Presently he descended into the canyon and cautiously made his way toward the robbers' retreat. He felt sure that Frank had encountered some of the outlaws and had been taken prisoner. He was resolved to find out, and if his companion had got into their hands, he must attempt his rescue at all hazards.

After a half-hour's tramp the sound of voices came to him from beyond a thicket and he recognized one of them as belonging to Mockton!

"Well, it seems that the captain's here at last," the old mountain-man muttered. "I wonder if they know of my escape? I'll bet a hoss they don't. I'll just creep up closer and learn what they're talkin' about."

And dropping on hands and knees, he began crawling stealthily in the desired direction, but had not passed over a dozen yards when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Falling flat upon the ground he glanced backward, and could discern the figure of a man coming slowly toward him.

"Who can it be?" he asked himself. "Surely not Frank!"

The figure drew near. Nat grasped his rifle and waited.

Nearer and nearer drew the person and then—went by, passing within a yard of where Nat lay.

"It's not Frank," he muttered; "it's one of them cursed outlaws."

Then, as he peered through an opening in the thicket, he heard the sharp, imperative challenge from Mockton—"Who comes there?" and saw the figure reel and fall to the earth.

Two dark figures hastily approached the fallen man, with exclamations of surprise.

"It's Jose," gasped Mockton, as he raised him up. "He's been shot!—quick! some water!"

His companion hurried away, and soon returned with a canteen, which they held to the wounded man's lips.

"How did this happen?" asked Mockton.

"Are you hurt much?"

"*El diablo!* he shot us both—he is a demon—he is the devil!" cried the Spaniard, in a weak voice.

"Where is the prisoner? Has he escaped?"

"Yes, curse him! and left a bullet in my body!"

"And where is Jake?"

"Dead! a bullet through his heart. I was as if dead for hours."

The outlaws stood as if paralyzed.

"Didn't you disarm the prisoner?" demanded Mockton. "What does this mean?"

"Yes, we took his gun and pistols. He had nothing to shoot with—it is some of his friends."

"It was the devil!" declared Jose. "He shot us both, and there was no sound of his gun."

"It was the Black Wizard!" cried another of the outlaws who had just come from the thicket.

"We saw him the other night; he will kill us all; he is a demon!"

"Dogs! burros!" hissed the infuriated Mockton. "You are cowards—you are afraid of a shadow. It is a trick—a trick of the cursed officers! Come, let us get this man inside—and then we will search every bush and rock in this canyon. We will soon find your Black Wizard, and put a bullet through him!"

They assisted the wounded Jose to his feet, and led him away. A few moments later they all disappeared through the thicket that grew about the entrance of the cave.

"Well, things am gittin' kinder interestin' around these premises," chuckled Nat, as he rose from his place of concealment, but, just then, a dark figure rose from the bushes not ten yards away.

Quick as a thought Nat's rifle was at his shoulder.

"Who are you? If you move I'll bore you through!" he cried, in a low tone.

"Nat Barker!" exclaimed a well-known voice.

"Frank Hammond or I'm a liar!" ejaculated Nat, joyfully. "What in the name of common sense aire you doin' here?"

"Searching for you," replied Frank, "but how is it you are here, safe and sound?"

"Well, it's jist the biggest piece of luck I ever had," replied Nat, in a cautious voice.

"But, come, boy, we must pull out of this. There's a nest of them varmants in there, and I guess we ain't ready to open up business with them just yet."

Realizing their danger the two men turned and stole noiselessly up the canyon.

A half-hour's rapid walk took them out of the great gully, and up into the hills lying to the north.

As they neared the old building which they had visited in the morning, Nat said:

"We'll just rest here a little, and then pull for the ranch."

"That will do," replied Frank. "I don't suppose the outlaws will be likely to strike our trail to-night. I think they are pretty well demoralized over to-day's work."

"You're talkin'," affirmed Nat, as they threw themselves on the grass.

Then Nat related, in a few words his strange adventure with the bandits—his capture, the mysterious shooting of the guards and his subsequent escape.

"It is strange—very strange," observed Frank, thoughtfully. "Who do you suppose shot the outlaws, Nat?"

"That's jist what's puzzlin' me. There's some mystery here that I can't see through, and from what I overheard of their conversation they're as much in the dark about the matter as we are."

"Perhaps it was the work of the Apaches?" suggested Frank. "I encountered a quad of them this evening while searching for you, and came near getting taken in, but escaped by climbing over the cliff."

"Shades of ole Christopher Columbus! but things are gettin' interestin'! Injins, robbers and Ole Nick himself are mixed up in one neighborhood!"

"I also had an adventure," added Frank, "but before I relate it, I move that we get a little grub from our haversacks and refresh ourselves."

"A good idea," assented the other. "I've got a little water left in my canteen to wash it down with."

Then as they devoured their provender of dried beef and hard bread, Frank related his adventure on the cliff and his strange meeting with the Robber Queen.

"Holy Caesar!" ejaculated Nat. "Ain't you jokin'?"

"No; it's a solemn fact," declared Frank.

"Great guns! won't wonders never cease?"

"And, Nat," continued Frank, in a thoughtful voice, "there's some great mystery connected with that woman's life, and he could not conceal his enthusiasm as he described her wonderful beauty. "I know it just as well as if I had heard it from her own lips, and if I live I mean to fathom it!"

I low laugh escaped Nat.

"Better let the job out, young man," he warned; "it ain't a very profitable occupation to go round fathomin' that woman's business."

"Yet I mean to take the chances."

"Great Scott! are you crazy?" ejaculated Nat.

"That woman is the worst character in Arizona. She wouldn't think any more of killin' you than she would a snake if you crossed her—"

"I can't believe it of her, Nat; there is some mistake; I know that woman can't be as bad as you say. There is a deep plot somewhere—I am going to investigate it—and before I leave these hills!"

CHAPTER XII.

NAT'S STORY—A MYSTERY INDEED.

NAT BARKER was thunderstruck with astonishment at Frank's expressed determination to visit the Robber Queen.

"Thunder and tornadoes! do you want to run your head against a bullet?" blurted the old guide, hardly crediting his senses.

"No; I can't say that I do," laughed Frank, amused at his friend's vehemence, "but you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill. I don't mean to rush blindly into danger, nor engage in any hand-to-hand fight with a gang of cut-throats."

"Then, what do you intend to do?"

"As I said before, I want to find out why it is that that woman leads such a strange life, and I mean to do so; but I shall use common sense. Have I not already seen her once—talked to her and escaped unharmed? Why is it that I may not do so again?"

Nat made a gesture of impatience.

"Do you want to fall into Mockton's hands again?" he demanded.

"No; I can't say that I do."

"Then keep away from that woman. She is a devil—a murderess!"

"You don't mean to say—"

Nat stopped him with a gesture of impatience.

"Listen!" he cried, in a firm tone. "You want to hear the history of that woman's life, and why she leads the life she does. I can tell you—you need not go to her—"

"What! You?"

"Yes; I first met her up on the Pecos in New Mexico—"

"On the Pecos?"

"Yes; but, don't inter'upt me. I was then workin' on a ranch for a man by the name of Mark Conway—"

"Why, he used to be my father's partner," broke in Frank.

"Exactly. Well, as I said before, I was working on a ranch for Mark Conway. When your father bought another ranch in Arizona he sold his interest in the one on the Pecos to Mr. Conway. That left a great deal of business on Conway's hands, and he was just looking about for some one who could assist him in this work, when Sim Burlock came, bringing recommendations from a well-known ranchman in Colorado.

Mr. Conway hired him at once, and for some time he proved himself to be a valuable man, looking after the large business as faithfully as if it had been his own."

"A short time after Burlock had taken up his residence on the ranch, his sister, Azamerto Burlock, a pretty brunette, came from Los Animas, and she and her brother lived in a house which had been built for their accommodation, near the Conway ranch-house."

"Mark Conway's wife had died years before and he had but one child, Annie by name, and one of the prettiest girls in the Territory. She was jist nineteen, and had come from the East a month before, where she had been going to school."

"Well, things went on smooth enough for a month or two, then trouble began brewing. This Sim Burlock, it seems, got to paying attentions to Annie Conway. She disliked and avoided him on all occasions; but he wouldn't take any dismissal, and kept on forcing his presence on her until finally she had to complain to her father. That night Mr. Conway visited the house occupied by Sim Burlock and his sister, for the purpose of reproving Burlock for his ungentlemanly conduct. But he did not come back."

"The next day the little house was found empty. There was blood on the floor, and Burlock and his sister had disappeared. Then it was discovered that Miss Conway was also gone. There was great excitement. Mr. Conway had been murdered by Burlock and his sister; that was the conclusion of every one. But, the body of Conway could not be found. It was also discovered that a tramp herder by the name of Wick Bolinger had taken his departure."

"A posse of armed men immediately set out in pursuit of the fugitives. The next day they came upon Bolinger in a deep canyon, twenty miles from the Conway Ranch. When ordered to surrender he refused and was shot down by the men in pursuit. He only lived an hour, but made a confession before he died. He said that Conway and Burlock had had angry words on the fatal night, and Burlock had struck Conway. Conway had resented the attack, when he was stabbed to death by Azamerto, who had come to her brother's assistance. Bolinger was present at the time of the tragedy, and carried the body of the dead ranchman and threw it into the Pecos River, a short distance away."

"The three then entered the Conway residence, overpowered the housekeeper, and speedily bound and gagged Miss Conway, after which they plundered the house of all its valuables, including about five thousand in money, which Mr. Conway had just received the day before, and had not yet placed in the bank. Then, under cover of darkness, they all fled to the hills, carrying Annie Conway along as a prisoner. The country, far and wide, was searched, but nothing of the fugitives could be found. The letter of recommendation brought by Burlock proved to be a forgery."

"Since that fatal night detectives and officers, far and near, have been looking for Burlock and his sister, but all have failed to get hold of them. Knowing that they might never be caught if the work was left to the ones who had undertaken the job, I left the ranch and swore never to return till the guilty were brought to justice. I have tracked them into the Sierra Madres in New Mexico, then to Tucson and to Tombstone. Twice I have almost had them but they escaped. In my search for Burlock and the murderess, his sister, I have been the means of bringing a half-dozen robbers and murderers to justice. I make no friends or confidants. I am known as Maverick Mose, the Arizona Detective. The officers whom I have had dealings with gave me the name. Now, after my long search, I have located the game at last. You wanted a history of Merto, the Robber Queen. You have had it. She and Azamerto Burlock are one and the same!"

As Nat finished his story, he leaned back against the trunk of a small tree, and gazed fixedly through the darkness at his companion.

A cry of pain escaped Frank's lips, and he covered his face with his hands.

"My dear boy," continued Nat, "you see how foolish you are in thinking of putting yourself in the power of such characters as Merto, the Robber Queen, and her brother. You have already had a taste of Sim Burlock's treachery and villainy."

"What!" cried Frank, "and he is—"

"None other than our friend, Bill Mockton, who was so kind as to attempt our lives in Desert City."

"That is enough!" returned Frank, extending his hand to Nat. "Let us leave here at once. I see now that I have been very foolish."

The two friends clasped hands in silence, and arose from their positions on the ground.

"Now, I have a plan," spoke Nat. "We must push on to the ranch and obtain reinforcements, and capture the robbers before they become alarmed and leave this place—"

"You are right," affirmed Frank. "Let us be off."

And the two men started across the hill, taking an easterly course.

They traveled steadily until daylight, when they were in sight of the Hammond Ranch buildings, which were now only a few miles away.

They made a short halt, and then resumed their journey, arriving at the cluster of buildings about nine o'clock.

Here a great surprise awaited them.

As they approached the house they were met by one of the cowboys, who informed them that Frank's father had left for Desert City to meet him, a week before.

"Where is Rube Bentley?" asked Frank.

"At the house," answered the cowboy, and the two men hastened down the walk to a large two-story dwelling, with wide, sweeping verandas on three sides.

Rube Bentley was Richard Hammond's foreman and trusted clerk, who directed the entire business of the ranch in Mr. Hammond's absence. During the shipping season he usually spent some weeks in Kansas City, looking after his employer's interests, and then it was that he and Frank had met, and became warm friends.

As the two men approached the house they were met by Bentley, who gave them a warm greeting.

"And so father went to Desert City to meet me?" said Frank, a troubled look upon his face.

"Yes; his long absence excited my alarm, and yesterday, on hearing that the Apaches were again in this vicinity, I dispatched a dozen armed men to Desert City in search of him. And so you have not seen him? That is strange! I fear something has happened to him."

"Yes," responded Frank, "he has fallen into the hands of the Apaches or robbers, I'm afraid, and we must collect what men we can and return at once," and Frank related briefly his and Nat's strange adventures since his arrival at Desert City.

A troubled look crossed Rube Bentley's face.

"You are right," he said, leading the way into a wide, comfortably-furnished room; "I'll order horses and arms for us immediately, and as soon as you have had a lunch, and taken a little rest, we'll start for the mountains."

As he spoke he hurried from the room to give the necessary orders.

In a few minutes Rube returned.

"I can only muster seven men besides ourselves," he said. "I sent the best men on the ranch to Desert City yesterday, and there are only some Mexican herders left. I don't know how they'd stand fire, should we encounter a gang of Apaches. But, Abe Gruder will accompany us—and he's used to that sort of business—would be perfectly at home in a brush with the red-skins; but I'm sure we'll meet the other boys somewhere on the route."

"We certainly will," responded Frank. "It seems strange that we did not meet them somewhere in the hills."

Two hours later, Nat Barker and Frank Hammond, accompanied by Rube Bentley, Abe Gruder and six Mexicans, rode in the direction of the hills that stood darkly outlined against the western sky.

The sun was low in the horizon when they arrived in the vicinity of Urkos Pass, and slowly and cautiously made their way across the cliffs that lay to the north.

Presently they arrived at the old Aztec building which Frank and Nat had visited the day before. Here a halt was made. The men dismounted to give their jaded horses a breathing spell, and hold a consultation.

Nat then explained the situation to Bentley, giving the location of the robbers' cave.

"Now, the first thing to be done," said Rube, "is to push on till we meet the other boys. Then, if they have heard nothing of Mr. Hammond, we'll make an attack upon the outlaws. Those devils are becoming very troublesome of late, and only a month ago a ranchman was captured by them and held for \$10,000 ransom. These outrages are becoming of such frequent occurrence that it's time the people had taken the matter in hand. I fear that Mr. Hammond has been captured by them, and they are perhaps holding him, only waiting for a favorable opportunity to demand a ransom."

"It does look that way," affirmed Nat. "He never reached Desert City, that's sure, and if he hasn't fallen into the hands of these varmints I'm mistaken."

"Frank," said Rube, turning to address the young ranchman, but he stopped and looked inquiringly around. Frank had disappeared.

"Where is Frank?" asked Rube.

"I think he went into the old house there," answered Abe Gruder.

Rube and Nat entered the building, and a few moments later came out, a puzzled expression on their faces.

"He's not in there," observed Rube. "Where can he be?"

Hurriedly they glanced about them. Then they searched the surrounding thickets. They called to him, but no answer came.

They looked at each other with blank faces.

What did it mean?

Frank Hammond had disappeared as mysteriously as if the earth had opened and engulfed him!

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

A LOOK of consternation overspread the faces of the little party.

"Surely he must be here somewhere," declared Rube.

The search was renewed, but not the slightest trace of young Hammond could be found.

What could have happened to him? Surely he would not have gone away without saying a word to any one.

"I'll tell you what, boys," observed Nat, "there's some devilish mystery connected with this place," and he related the story of his capture by the outlaws and his final escape, giving an account of the strange shooting of the two guards by some invisible marksman, and of the mysterious sight seen on the cliff, the night before.

"Looks as if the devil himself had taken possession of these parts," declared Abe Gruder.

The Mexicans looked frightened, and crossed themselves repeatedly.

"There's some human agency behind it all," asserted Nat, "but it's a puzzler."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Rube Bentley. "I'm not willing to leave this place till we find Frank."

"Nor am I," added old Nat; "but we'll never

do anything by standin' round here talkin'. If he's on this hill, we want to find him, and if not, we want to know it. Let's search every bush and rock within a quarter of a mile of the place, and go at it right now."

"That's the talk," responded Abe Gruder.

The little crowd gathered in a knot, while Nat arranged the plans of procedure.

"Now, Rube," said Nat, "you stand guard over our horses and traps while we do the searchin', and if ye see any one prowlin' around, jist notify us by firin' your gun, and we'll be here in a jiffy."

Then Nat, Abe Gruder, and the six Mexicans scattered out over the hill and began their search. For nearly an hour they scanned every nook and thicket and rock far and near, but no trace of the missing one could be found.

Then at a signal from Nat they all returned to the old house to decide on what was to be done next.

"Rube, did you see or hear anything to excite suspicion while we were gone?" asked Abe, as they came up to the place where Rube had been left.

No answer.

"Rube?" Silence.

Hurriedly they glanced about the place.

Rube Bentley had disappeared!

"Mother of God! the place is bewitched!" cried one of the Mexicans, crossing himself.

"El diablo! We will all be killed!" gasped another, trembling with fear.

Nat and Abe looked at each other, and were silent. They were dumfounded.

"I don't understand it," muttered Nat, breaking the silence. "Great Caesar! what can this mean?"

Exclamations of terror came from the Mexicans.

"Mother of God save us!" chorused the Mexicans straining their eyes across the hill.

Nat and Abe glanced up the canyon to the west and a startling sight met their gaze.

There, upon a lofty rock, overlooking the deep canyon, stood that strange monster—the Black Wizard, enveloped in a blood-red light, a white grinning skeleton in the background!

The next moment there came a series of unearthly yells from a score of savage throats, far down the canyon, and the faint sound of many hurrying feet.

With cries of mortal terror upon their lips, the Mexicans turned and fled across the hill, as if pursued by avenging demons.

Nat and Abe hurried in pursuit, endeavoring to quell their superstitious fear, but they might as well have attempted to stop a herd of frightened antelopes.

With a muttered exclamation of chagrin and disgust, Nat stopped, and turning to his companion, said:

"It ain't no use to try to stop 'em, Abe. The onery cusses'll run till they're give out. Maybe they'll return if they find we ain't follerin' 'em."

"Let's go back and see to the horses," said Abe. "It looks as if the old devil was working against us, sure enough."

As the two men turned to retrace their steps, they found that the strange apparition had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared.

"Nat," remarked Abe, "did you hear that yelling down in the canyon? It was Apaches as sure as you are living."

"We've got to be on the lookout," replied Nat, "or we'll run into some of them prowlin' varmints. They're thicker 'an fleas on a dog, 'round these parts."

"Yes, and we've got to keep an eye on the horses. It won't do to be left afoot out here; and then, there's Frank and Rube. My God! what can this mystery mean? Where can the boys be? They wouldn't 'a' gone away without telling us, and blamed if they have gone away. They must be around here somewhere, and I'm in for staying right here till daylight, if we don't find them before."

"That's me, exactly; but, we must keep kinder shady. Now let's tie the horses to the trees there against the wall of the old house, so that they won't be so easily seen by any one that might be sneakin' around. Then we'll jist lie down here in the thicket and wait for daylight. I guess them Mexicans'll come back as soon as they get over their scare. The boys who were sent to Desert City ought to be along here to-night some time, and we want to keep our eyes and ears open."

In a short time the two men had brought the horses and tied them securely in the shadow of the old house, then secreting themselves in the thicket near by, they waited and listened.

Two hours went by.

"Hark!" cried Nat, suddenly, breaking the silence. "Did you hear that?"

"What was it?"

"Some one's comin'. Listen!"

The two men bent their ears to the ground, and as they did so they could hear the tramp of advancing feet.

"It's the Greasers comin' back," whispered Abe.

The steps drew nearer and nearer. Suddenly the dark forms of a dozen men could be seen advancing cautiously across the hill.

"Quick! let us get into the ole house," whispered Nat, excitedly. "It's the outlaws!"

Silently the two men rose and hurried toward the house, but before they had gained shelter behind its walls, exclamations from the advancing outlaws told them that they had been discovered.

"Keep behind the wall," cautioned Nat as they entered the old building, "and be ready for business if they try to come upon us."

The two men threw themselves upon the floor and peered out through the open door, clutching their rifles, ready for whoever might come.

When scarcely fifty yards away the outlaws halted, and appeared to be holding a consultation. The next moment half of their number stole around and stopped on the opposite side of the building.

"They've got us surrounded," whispered Nat, "and we're in a devilish close place."

Ten minutes passed; then they saw the form of a man approaching. Twenty yards from the building the figure halted, and a voice called out:

"Hello! Who's in there?"

Instantly Nat recognized the voice as that of Bill Mockton!

Keeping well behind the wall, Nat replied:

"What business is it of yours, who's in here?"

"Well, come out. We want to speak to you," returned Mockton.

"Speak away. Nobody's holdin' you."

"Don't get too impudent. It will only be the worse for you. We've got you cornered. Are you coming out?"

"Not this trip."

"Then we will make you come."

"All right."

"We are six to your one."

"How do you know you are?"

"There are only two of you. We saw you go in."

"Then why don't you come ahead and take us?"

"Because we don't want to kill you, if you'll surrender without trouble."

"What do you want with us?" demanded Nat. "Who are you? and what do you mean?"

"We are officers, and want you to return to Desert City with us."

"What for?"

"Have you forgotten that you broke jail there? You forget that I know who you are."

"I have not forgotten that you tried to blow me up in the jail, you bloody villain!"

A muttered oath escaped Mockton's lips.

"I'll order my men to fire on you in five minutes if you don't come out and surrender."

"If you do, some one will get hurt."

"We'll take the chances," and with this the outlaw, who had kept his body well behind a huge boulder during the conversation, crept back to the place where his men were awaiting him.

"They won't surrender?" asked one of the men.

"No," replied Mockton, sullenly. "We must attack them!"

"Do you think they will resist if we do?"

"Yes, curse them! till they are killed."

"It is Maverick Mose?"

"Yes, and we must capture him at any cost. He must never leave this place alive!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OUTLAW'S SCHEME.

THOUGH Nat Barker and Abe Gruder were fortified in a place where it would be a dangerous undertaking for the enemy to attempt their capture, yet they recognized the fact that they were in a most grave situation.

Only a small portion of water remained in their canteens, and it would only be a question of time when thirst would drive them to surrender, should the outlaws prolong the siege. They might attempt escape by cutting their way through the enemy's lines, but this would be almost certain death since the house was completely surrounded.

"If them cowardly Greasers hadn't left us," hissed Nat, "we could clean up the whole gang."

"I wouldn't feel very sorry if the Apaches would get every one of their onery scalps," averred Abe, wrathfully.

Mockton well knew that the two men would resist any attack they might make, and that it would be a dangerous undertaking to attempt to rout them from their stronghold.

"Zeb," said Mockton, addressing one of his men, "can't we hit upon some plan to capture these devils without a fight? We must hit upon some scheme to outwit them without running our heads against their rifles."

"That's jist my idee, exactly."

"What scheme would you suggest?"

The outlaw addressed as Zeb remained silent for some time, and then he said:

"There was an attempt made to blow up these same cusses in Desert City—"

"Yes—curse them, but they escaped!"

"And they may not do so the next time."

"You mean to blow up this old building?"

"Exactly."

"Good! But, how is it to be done? They are on the watch."

"Look," and Zeb pointed to some high rocks, surrounded by a growth of bushes, and not ten yards from the wall. "We can approach from behind these, without running any chance of being seen. Then the powder can be thrown in before they know what has happened."

"But, there is no door on this side—how will we manage to get the shot inside the building?"

"There is no door, that is true, but there is a big hole in the roof near this side which will answer still better."

"I see! The scheme is a good one, and now let's get ready for business. Have we got plenty of powder?"

"Yes; there's a whole keg in the cave—that which we captured from the prospectors."

"Then let us return to the cave at once and bring what is needed. But first, I must tell the boys what we intend to do, and instruct them to keep the closest watch over the old building till we return."

In a few moments the men were made acquainted with the proposed scheme. Then Mockton and Zeb set out for the cave, eager to put their plan into execution.

A half-hour later the two outlaws entered the cave. They passed the guard at the entrance, and threading their way through a narrow, winding passage, they soon came to a large room, lit by a half-dozen miner's lamps. The floor was covered with a thick layer of soft white sand, over which were scattered here and there, some rude articles of furniture.

Zeb passed on to the far end of this cavern, while Mockton turned into a small passage leading to the left, and soon arrived at a room of some twelve to fourteen feet in length, by ten feet in width, lit by a single tin lamp.

In one corner of this room, upon a couch of furs, reclined the form of a woman, dark and beautiful, with a mass of raven hair falling about her shapely shoulders.

She started up as Mockton entered, her dark eyes shining strangely in the lamp's flickering light.

"What news? have you found them?" she asked, in a low, eager voice.

"Yes; it is as I supposed. Maverick Mose is here, and we have got him cornered, and he sha'n't escape us this time."

"Where is he?" she questioned.

"In the old ruined building on the hill."

"You will not fail this time?"

"No; curse him!" hissed Mockton, an evil light shining in his eyes, "we'll get him this time if it costs us our lives!"

"Are you sure that it is Maverick Mose?"

"There is not the least doubt."

"How many are with him?"

"Only one."

"Is he an officer or a detective?"

"I hardly think he is either, but then he'll be treated as if he were."

"If he does not escape?"

"I'll see that he don't."

"But, if they should both escape?"

"Then we are ruined."

"If we remain here, you mean?"

"Yes."

"But if we should leave the country—"

"It is not easy for so many of us to escape when the place may be watched."

A sarcastic laugh escaped her lips.

"Is not all the money in my possession?" she asked.

"Yes—but you don't mean—"

"We must take it and leave. There is no honor among thieves," with a low laugh.

The outlaw's eyes glistened.

"Do you mean it?"

"Listen," she cried, in a low voice, glancing toward the passage leading to the outer cave, "why should we stay here and run our necks into a rope? Let what come will, this place is spotted, and we are idiots if we remain. The officers are already getting wind of us, and we must not stay here and fall into their net."

"Merto, you are a genius! We shall do as you say—and to-morrow night!"

"That will do. I will be ready."

The sound of approaching steps came from down the passage.

"Ready, captain?" came the voice of Zeb, who just then appeared in the doorway, carrying a keg of powder and a coil of fuse.

"All right," answered Mockton, hurrying down the passage to join his companion. A few moments later they left the cavern and walked swiftly toward the old Aztec building on the hill.

They found the men waiting eagerly for their arrival.

"Seen anything of them?" questioned Mockton.

"No; everything is as still as a graveyard; but there are more than two in there—"

"Why do you think so?"

"There's a lot of horses tied among the trees by the wall—seven or eight—maybe more. We couldn't count 'em without riskin' gittin' a bullet in our head."

"The blazes! Well, we'll soon see."

"That's whatever!" affirmed Zeb. "And now for business," and he began fixing a fuse in the keg of powder.

"You must be careful and not let them get sight of you," cautioned Mockton. "They are cunning devils and will be on the lookout."

"They're not going to get a squint at me," asserted Zeb, confidently. "And when I drop this little keg over into their castle, I don't think they'll have much time to see where it comes from."

"Have you made the fuse short?"

"Yes; it will explode in ten seconds after it leaves my hands."

Mockton then made a circuit of the building, informing all the men of what was going to be done.

"Now we are ready for business," he announced, as he returned to where Zeb was waiting his orders.

"Hark!" ejaculated Mockton; "was that a voice in the old house?"

They listened intently for several moments.

"I don't hear anything," responded Zeb.

"Better wait a little," suggested Mockton.

"We're in no hurry. We've got 'em cornered, and can afford to wait till we have the best chance."

A half-hour passed, and silence lay over the old building.

"Now, go ahead with the circus," whispered Mockton, "and we'll keep you covered with our guns."

A moment later Zeb had taken the keg of powder and was crawling cautiously toward the large boulder that formed an impenetrable breastwork within ten yards of the northern wall of the building. Reaching there, he paused and listened intently. No sound came from the inside. Then he rose to a sitting position, and striking a match, held it to the fuse, one end of which was securely fastened in the keg of powder.

A little wreath of black smoke arose as the tar on the fuse began to burn, then—a small stream of brilliant sparks shot upward, followed by a low, hissing sound. The fuse had caught!

In a moment Zeb arose to his feet, and calling all his strength into play, he threw the keg over the wall of the old house. The next moment it descended through the broken roof and fell with a dull sound on the inside. Quick as a flash the outlaw turned about and threw himself behind the sheltering rocks.

Scarcely had he done so when a terrific report shook the very earth. A great tongue of flame leaped high in the air hurling huge masses of stone before it.

"I reckon that settles 'em," chuckled Mockton, as Zeb hurried to his side.

"That's whatever!" responded Zeb, grimly. "I guess we can go in and get their sausage when the smoke clears away."

But, at that moment, a cry of alarm came from the outlaws.

Nearly a dozen horses, snorting with fear, came leaping wildly out of the thicket near the old building, and scattered across the hills.

"There's a whole nest of them devils in there," declared Mockton. "We've got to be cautious, and if they ain't killed they may give us trouble."

The first streaks of coming dawn were now

visible in the eastern horizon. The cloud of smoke that hung over the building had drifted away. The light in the east grew brighter and brighter.

Then Mockton ordered every man to advance upon the building. With rifles ready for instant use they obeyed. They reached the door, and with a sudden rush they entered and glanced hurriedly about them. Nothing but a mass of shattered rocks met their gaze.

The two men had disappeared!

CHAPTER XV.

LEFT IN THE DARKNESS.

WE will now return to Frank Hammond, whose strange disappearance had so greatly mystified his companions.

When Frank entered the old building he little dreamed of the strange adventures that would befall him before he emerged from its moldering walls. He stood for some time gazing at the queer workmanship displayed in the smooth polished walls of pale blue cement and stone. As his eyes wandered aimlessly over the room, the gleam of something in the crevice of the rocky floor attracted his attention.

Advancing across a huge pile of rubbish that lay on the floor, he picked up the gleaming object, and discovered it to be a small golden locket, of delicate workmanship. A look of surprise overspread his face as he gazed at the beautiful trinket, so out of place did it seem in that deserted ruin.

"Strange how this came here," he muttered. As he spoke he touched the spring. The locket flew open, disclosing the miniature of a beautiful young girl, with large, shadowy eyes that seemed imbued with life as they looked calmly out of that finely molded face in its gold setting.

An exclamation of astonishment broke from Frank's lips:

"*The Robber Queen!*" he cried, a strange expression crossing his face. Then his eyes fell on another picture in the other side of the locket. It was of a man, apparently of middle age, with something about it that impressed Frank that he had seen that face somewhere.

"Who can it be?" he mused. "Surely I have seen that face before, and yet—"

He stopped abruptly, a sudden gleam of recognition crossing his face.

"*Nat Barker! Great Heavens!*" The words fell from his lips in a startled whisper. "What new mystery is this? Surely—"

As he spoke he stepped backward into the corner so as to avail himself of the light that was streaming through a huge hole that had been broken in the roof. The next moment he felt the great slab of rock give way beneath his feet. He staggered wildly—threw out his hands, clutched desperately at the smooth wall, and then—fell down—into the darkness below!

Stunned, bewildered, and only half conscious, he lay for a long time at the bottom of the deep hole or pit into which he had fallen, hardly realizing what had happened. All was as black as ink about him. With an effort he staggered to his feet and tried to penetrate the surrounding darkness. He turned his eyes upward, but not a gleam of light met his gaze. The great stone that had moved to let him in had returned to its place, apparently.

As soon as he could collect his scattered faculties, he realized that he had fallen into some secret cavern or cellar beneath the old structure.

The floor on which he stood was soft, and yielded to his feet as if covered with sand. He reached out his hands and they came in contact with a smooth rocky wall. To attempt to climb it would be useless.

He shouted at the top of his voice to his companions, but no answer came in response to his call. Again and again he shouted loudly, but to no purpose.

It was impossible for him to tell the depth of the pit into which he had fallen. It was twenty feet at least, and he knew that it would be impossible for his companions to hear his call unless they were in the room overhead.

He listened, but all was silent. Where were his companions? Well he knew that they would search for him as soon as his absence was discovered, but it would only be by the rarest chance if they found his place of imprisonment. They would perhaps simply glance into the rooms of the old house, and then go elsewhere to search for him.

Suddenly he remembered his match case, and drawing it from his pocket he hurriedly struck a light.

By the aid of the feeble flame he discovered

that he was in a narrow passageway, with smooth rocky walls rising many feet above his head, and extending back into the darkness, how far he could not tell.

Lighting another match, he held it above his head, and found that it was full twenty feet to the floor from whence he had fallen. The walls were so smooth that he saw it would be impossible to scale them.

Glancing about the floor he beheld the locket he had found in the old house, lying at his feet. As he stooped to pick it up he started with astonishment. Placing the locket in his pocket, he began eagerly examining the soft sandy floor.

It was covered with tracks which had been made by the delicate shoe of some woman!

"Ah, the Robber Queen!" he muttered. "She has been here, and maybe—"

A sudden thought struck him. Perhaps the underground passage led to the robbers' cave! This seemed more than likely. There was a faint breath of fresh air coming into the cavern from some quarter. This convinced him that there was an opening from the passage somewhere. Perhaps it was not far away. He turned about, and as he did so he caught the gleam of a light far down the rocky hall. Some one was coming toward him carrying a torch!

In a moment Frank sunk behind an angle in the wall and waited in breathless silence.

As the figure with the torch drew nearer, Frank discovered that it was a woman, and, as the light fell on her face, he instantly recognized her as the Robber Queen!

He rose from his place of concealment and stood in the narrow circle of light.

She uttered a gasp of terror as her eyes fell upon the intruder, and was turning to fly from his presence, when his voice stopped her.

"Hold, lady!" he cried, "you need have no fear of me. Have you forgotten that we have met before?"

"What! you here!" she cried, fixing her eyes upon him.

"Yes—but—"

"And this is the way you keep your promises?" scornfully.

He lifted his hand and pointed upward.

"I fell through from the old house. It is no fault of mine that I am here."

An incredulous look came into her eyes.

"It was this that caused it all," he went on, drawing the locket from his pocket. "I stepped into the corner of the room to examine it and before I knew it I fell through some kind of a stone trap-door. The locket is yours, I dare say. Allow me to return it to you," extending the trinket to her.

"Thank you," she said, taking it from his hand. "I lost it several days ago. I did not expect to see it again."

"May I ask, how you came by the picture of the gentleman in that locket?" queried Frank.

She flashed him a haughty glance.

"I shall answer no questions from one whose presence is an intrusion," she replied, with a gesture of impatience. "Leave this place at once I command you!"

How wondrously beautiful she looked, standing there in the flickering torch-light, her proud, graceful form drawn to its full height, her dark lustrous eyes gleaming with a soft splendor.

The young rancher stood as if spell-bound, fascinated by the strange beauty. Was it possible this was the Robber Queen?

At length he lifted his hand and pointed to the wall.

"You command me to leave, and yet I cannot obey. How am I to scale that wall?"

"Ah! I forgot that you do not know the way," she replied, and motioning him to follow, she led the way through a narrow passage. Presently they came to what appeared to be a rude spiral stairway cut into the rocky wall and leading upward.

The beautiful guide mounted this and led the way around a huge column of glittering spar that gleamed like marble in the light of the flaring torch.

Following this stairway for some time, she paused, and pointing to a large flat stone overhead, said:

"There is the place where you leave through. Pull on the iron ring and the way will be open."

Frank advanced to her side, and reaching upward, pulled on an iron ring that was fastened to a great flat stone. Instantly the rock turned as on a pivot, disclosing an opening to the room above.

As he did so an exclamation came from over-

head, and, the next moment, the face of Rube Bentley was bending over the opening.

"Hello, Rube!" greeted Frank. "I—"

He stopped suddenly, for a cry came from behind, and then the sound of a falling body down into the cavern below!

"My God! she is killed!" gasped Frank, in an agonized voice. Then calling to Rube, he cried: "Quick, Rube! for God's sake come down and help me! There's a woman here, and she's killed!"

Speechless with astonishment, Rube let himself down through the opening, and was pulled onto the stairway's narrow footing by Frank.

"For Heaven's sake let us hurry!" entreated Frank, as he half pulled his companion after him down the rocky stairs. The torch had fallen into the cavern, and was extinguished, and the two men were compelled to make their way by the light of matches, which Frank struck as they descended the winding stairs.

Stopping to explain nothing to his mystified companion, Frank led the way down the passage, and soon came to a dark object lying upon the sandy floor, the extinguished torch lying near by.

Quickly picking up the torch, Frank lit it. Then handing it to Rube, he bent over the senseless form at his feet.

There was a deep cut on the side of the woman's head, and her colorless face was flecked with blood, which was slowly oozing from the wound.

"My God! she is killed!" cried Frank, lifting the unconscious form in his arms. "Quick, Rube! give me some water from your canteen!"

Rube handed his canteen to Frank, who took it and began bathing the insensible woman's face.

"She'll come around in a moment," said Rube, confidently, feeling her pulse. "She's just been stunned by the fall."

And, quickly removing his coat, he placed it on the floor and Frank deposited his fair burden upon it. Then, removing his own coat, he placed it beneath her head.

"Just give her a little of this stuff," advised Rube, taking a flask of brandy from his pocket. "I guess she'll come round all right."

Frank knelt down and forced some of the brandy between the set, white lips, and was soon rewarded by seeing the color return to her cheeks and lips. Then her eyes slowly unclosed, and she gazed about her in a bewildered manner.

"What has happened?" she asked, in a feeble voice, a terrified look coming over her face.

"You fell from the rock up there," replied Frank, "but, thank Heaven! you are not hurt as badly as I feared you were."

For several moments she did not speak. Then suddenly raising herself, she staggered to her feet.

"I—I—am better now," she faltered, leaning against the wall. "I thank you for your kindness—but you must go now—" and she pointed toward the stairway.

Then her eyes fell on Rube Bentley.

"*Betrayed!* Oh, my God! I am lost!" she cried, in an agonized voice, and before Frank could divine her intention, she struck the torch to the floor, extinguishing it, and then turned and fled down the passage.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE GREAT CAVERN.

FRANK HAMMOND and Rube Bentley stood speechless with surprise for one brief moment, and then recovering his presence of mind Frank hurriedly relit the torch. But before this could be accomplished the strange beauty had disappeared.

"Come!" cried Frank, starting down the passage, "let us go after her. She may be badly hurt, and will need our assistance."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Rube, as he followed his companion. "Who is this woman? and what does her strange conduct mean?"

Briefly Frank related his meeting with the Robber Queen, at the base of the cliff, and then of his falling through the trap-door in the old house, and his meeting with her again in the cavern.

Rube gave vent to a low whistle.

"And you would risk running into the robbers' den, and getting a bullet through you? No, I thank you; I don't want any of *that* kind of sport," and Rube stopped. "Frank," he continued, "let us return to our companions at once. They are searching for you now, and they will be greatly alarmed at my absence. It is madness to follow that woman. We must go back without a moment's delay."

"You are right, Rube," admitted Frank, turning about. "We must return at once."

The two men had traveled more than a hundred feet through the winding passage, and now they turned to retrace their steps. They walked hurriedly up the narrow passage or corridor. Presently they came into an immense room, with its ceiling fully thirty feet above their heads!

"Frank," said Rube, gazing about in astonishment, "we have taken the wrong direction. We must go back and find our way."

But this was easier said than done. For an hour they wandered from passage to passage without finding the stairway leading to the old building above. The floor over which they were now passing was of smooth hard rock, and it was impossible to follow their own trail back to the entrance.

With sinking hearts the two men realized their desperate situation. They were lost in the labyrinth of a great cavern and might never find their way to the outside.

The torch they carried would soon burn out, and then they would be left to grope their way in total darkness.

They traveled from room to room, and the night was well near spent. A feeling of despair came over the two men. Another hour and the torch would go out, and then—

A cry of joy escaped Frank's lips.

Suddenly emerging from a side passage, they had come upon the rocky stairway leading up to the old Aztec ruin!

Quickly the two men ascended the stairs, and, reaching the top, Frank pulled down on the iron ring, disclosing the opening above.

As they did so, they heard exclamations in the room overhead, and the next moment Nat Barker and Abe Gruder were peering down at the two men through the opening.

"Great Caesar! where'd you come from?" cried Nat in astonishment.

"From down there," replied Rube, laconically, pointing to the cavern. And in a few words he explained the cause of his and Frank's strange absence.

"Boys," said Nat, "this place is surrounded by Mockton and his men. The cursed Greasers have deserted us, and we're in a close place."

"Come!" cried Frank, hurriedly. "There's plenty of room down here for a thousand men, and we'll give the outlaws the slip."

"That's the idea, exactly," agreed Nat, and quickly the two men let themselves down through the opening to the stairs.

Then, allowing the huge stone to return to its place, all four made their way down the winding stairs to the cavern.

"The next thing to be done," observed Nat, "is to find a way out of this subterranean world."

"That is easier said than done," replied Frank. "We spent half the night wandering through these passages, and found no way out, and came very near not getting back to the place we started from. Besides, this torch won't burn much longer—"

Frank stopped abruptly, for, at that moment, a terrific explosion shook the very earth, and then came the crash of falling rocks in the old building above. Then a great hole was broken in the rocky floor, and a huge mass of stones fell into the cave with a loud crash.

"Great Caesar!" ejaculated Nat, "them devils have blown up the building!"

"Yes, and we only escaped by the skin of our teeth," responded Abe Gruder.

Quickly the four men drew back into a small recess in the cavern, and extinguished the torch.

"Now, boys, keep your ears open and look out," warned Nat, "them onery devils may take it into their heads to come down here after us."

For some time the four men crouched there in the darkness, listening intently for any approach of the foe.

Suddenly they heard footsteps in the old house overhead. Then followed a succession of bitter oaths, which could be plainly heard through the broken floor. This was succeeded by the sound of the rapid discharge of fire-arms.

"Hark! there's a fight going on up there!" exclaimed Rube. "It's the boys returned from Desert City! Come, let us go to their assistance! They have attacked the outlaws!"

"You're talkin'," cried Nat, "and let us all take a hand."

Hurriedly the four men scrambled up the rocky stairs, holding their weapons ready for instant use. A few moments later they stood in the ruined building. Quickly they glanced about them. The house was empty, and they hurried to the outside. It was broad daylight now. A ringing cheer greeted them, and, close

to the building, they beheld a dozen cowboys and the six Mexicans who had deserted them the night before.

"Come on boys, we've got the rascals!" cried one of the cowboys motioning to Rube and his three companions.

Then, as the four joined the newly arrived party, they found that five of the outlaws had been captured, including Mockton the outlaw chief. The rest had scattered and fled among the rocks into the hills.

Three of the outlaws captured had been wounded in the fight.

"Now, boys, for the robbers' cave," cried Nat, and placing a strong guard over the prisoners, they hastened in the direction of the thieves' retreat, led by Nat Barker.

Arriving at the cavern, Nat gave the signal he had heard the robbers use, and he and his followers were admitted. Before the guards had time to discover the deception they were overpowered and bound hand and foot.

Then they pressed on into the cave, and came suddenly upon Merto, the Robber Queen, busily engaged in packing a lot of valuables in a valise.

"You are my prisoner," cried Nat, advancing and laying his hand on the startled woman's shoulder.

An agonized cry escaped her, as she staggered back, clutching at the cavern wall for support, an ashy pallor overspreading her face.

"Maverick Mose!" her voice hoarse with emotion. "Why have you followed and dogged me so long? Are you the devil? or why do you seek to destroy me?"

"So you would like to know that, would you?" Nat replied. "Then I shall be pleased to accommodate you!"

As he spoke he quickly tore the false wig and whiskers from his head and face, revealing—not an old man as he had appeared to be, but a man of not over forty-five—handsome, vigorous and in the prime of life.

"Mark Conway!" she gasped, staggering back and clutching at the rocks for support!

"Yes, Mark Conway!" replied Nat, bitterly, dropping his awkward speech, used while in disguise—"not dead but alive! Your knife failed to accomplish its work, and I have come from the waters of the Pecos to bring you and your villainous brother to justice!"

"That you shall never do!" she cried, and drawing a pistol from her bosom she placed it against her breast and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp report, and this Queen of Bandits sunk down upon the cavern floor.

The men quickly gathered around her and Nat Barker, as we shall continue to call him, lifted the prostrate woman and laid her on her bed of skins.

But a glance told him that the shot had been fatal, and that the dethroned Queen had only a short time to live.

"You see I have foiled you at last," said the dying woman feebly. "You have hunted me down, but I shall soon be beyond your reach—"

"Where is my daughter? What have you done with her?" demanded Nat, in an agonized voice, glancing about the cavern.

A gleam of triumph lit the Queen's face.

"Gone!" she whispered hoarsely. "We sold her to the Apaches to buy their friendship, and she is doubtless the wife of some great chief, by this time!" and with a smile of fiendish satisfaction upon her face, the last spark of life went out. Merto, the Robber Queen, was dead!

"Oh, God! my child! my child!" moaned Nat, in deepest agony.

At that moment Frank Hammond, who had been a silent witness to the tragic scene, advanced and grasped Nat by the arm.

"Come!—for Heaven's sake come with me!" he entreated, his voice husky with emotion. "This is not the woman I met in the cavern. There is some great mystery here. Let us hurry to the cave under the old house. She is still there and we shall find her!" and he half dragged Nat down the passage.

Leaving a few men to take care of the dead and guard the prisoners, Nat and Frank, followed by a half-dozen men, set out for the old Aztec building.

And as they hurried up the rocky hill, Frank told Nat of the picture found in the strange woman's locket.

"Thank God! It is indeed my child—my child! and she is still alive!" cried Nat.

Reaching the ruined building, they quickly procured torches from the resinous pines near by and descended into the cave.

"Now, boys," said Frank, "we don't know what danger we may encounter, and we must be ready for instant action. I believe that Miss Conway is held a captive by some one who is in

this cave, but we must find her and rescue her or perish in the attempt."

Then the search commenced. Four hours they threaded their way through winding passages, marking their trail as they went. They had traveled, it seemed, many miles, when suddenly they caught the gleam of a light ahead, and advanced cautiously, clutching their rifles in their hands.

Then as they turned an angle in the rocky passage, they beheld a startling sight. Seated upon a pile of skins was an old man, while near him stood the hideous monster seen on the cliff by Nat and Frank a few nights before.

There was a sharp "click-click" of guns and then came the clear voice of Nat Barker, "Surrender or you die!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A JOYFUL SURPRISE—CONCLUSION.

FOR one brief moment there was silence in the cavern.

The old man started to his feet, with a look of alarm. Then a voice came from the strange monster:

"Mark Conway! Great Heavens!" Then the huge hairy coat that completely enveloped the figure was thrown aside—the hideous cowl dropped from the head, and—

"Richard Hammond!" ejaculated Nat in joyful surprise.

With the glad cry of "father!" on his lips, Frank Hammond hurried forward and father and son were clasped in each other's arms.

The cowboys who had accompanied Nat and Frank stood speechless with astonishment, at the strange tableau.

At that moment a female form glided swiftly into the light. Nat saw her and sprang forward crying, "Annie—my child! my child! Thank God!"

The strange girl uttered a glad cry and fell half fainting in her father's arms.

We shall not attempt to describe the joy of the meeting of the parents and children, for the happiness irradiating their faces could only express the deep joy of their hearts.

When Frank had somewhat recovered from the joyful surprise of meeting his father, he turned about to behold the beautiful woman whom he had met in the cavern clasped in Nat Barker's arms.

At that moment Nat turned to Frank, his whole face beaming with happiness, and said:

"This is my daughter Annie. Annie, this is Mr. Hammond, the son of my former partner, Richard Hammond."

Miss Conway held out her hand, a deep blush mantling her rich olive cheek.

"We have met before, I believe," she said, her voice low and musical.

"I shall never forget that fact," responded Frank warmly, taking her hand in his own, "but I didn't know—"

"He told me of the meeting," broke in her father, "and he thought you were the Robber Queen."

"It was his fault," declared Frank, pointing to Nat. "He insisted that you were the notorious Merto, while I tried to convince him of his mistake."

"Yes," spoke up Richard Hammond, "and she told me she had met a member of the robber band who had been hurt by falling over the cliff, and begged me to not molest him, as he did not seem to be wholly bad and might reform if he had a chance."

At this Miss Conway became greatly confused, while the two fathers broke into a hearty laugh.

"There, my son!" cried Frank's father, "there is still some hope for your reformation."

"Well, I believe she is a robber, after all," declared Nat, "for she robbed Frank of his senses completely. He was clean 'locoed' as the Mexicans say, and I'll be hanged if he didn't want to come back and see her, even after I had convinced him that she was the dreadful Robber Queen."

"Which proves that my judgment was not so defective as yours, after all," retorted Frank, while a deep blush stole over Miss Conway's cheeks.

"But, how in the name of Heaven is it that we find you here together in this place?" questioned Nat. "It all seems like a strange romance."

"Well, it is a strange story," responded Mr. Hammond, "but I'll not relate it now. It seems equally strange that you are here, for the report that you had been killed reached me months ago. As soon as I heard the report I hurried to your ranch on the Pecos to find that every one believed you to be lying at the bottom of the

river, while your daughter had been carried away by the murderers. I made every effort to get trace of the guilty parties, and brought a famous detective from the East, but he could gain no clew to their whereabouts."

"It is indeed almost a miracle that I am now alive," responded Nat. "It happened that an Indian was crossing the river when I was thrown into the water, and he rescued me from a watery grave, and took me to his solitary hut in the hills where I lay for a month, hovering between life and death. When at last I recovered, I found that every one believed me dead, and at once made up my mind to make my existence known to no one until I had found my daughter and brought my would-be assassins to justice. My mission is now accomplished, for they have both been captured, and though one of them is beyond human retribution, the other shall be punished to the full extent of the law."

"It is all wonderful—wonderful," responded Mr. Hammond. "But, the hand of Providence has moved in our favor." Then turning to the old man standing near him, he continued:

"This is Mr. Payton, prospector and assayer, and it is to him that we owe much of our good fortune, as you'll all agree when I have told my story."

The old man advanced and was cordially greeted by Nat and Frank.

The cowboys from the ranch were overjoyed to find Mr. Hammond safe and unharmed, and the strange events of the past few days were discussed during the entire day.

It was decided that the little party should remain in the cavern until night, and then journey to Desert City, where the robbers could be turned over to the proper authorities.

Nearly the entire day was spent in mutual explanations, and discussing the startling events of the past.

Miss Conway's story was listened to with breathless interest. After being kidnapped by the villainous Burlock and his sister, she was taken to a lonely cabin in the Sierra Madre Mountains where she was kept as a prisoner, for the purpose of compelling her to become the wife of Burlock. At last she was suddenly removed from there to a ranch house in Arizona, the owner of which was a villainous Mexican, who aided Burlock and his sister in holding her a captive. Then fearing discovery, as she supposed, her abductor removed her to the mountain cave at Urkos Pass.

Here Burlock threatened to kill her if she did not consent to become his wife, and upon her refusal he grew desperate, and would have carried his threat into execution, doubtless, had not a gang of Apaches suddenly arrived in the neighborhood at that time and threatened to commence war upon the intruders.

Then, in a fit of rage, partly from revenge upon the captive, and partly to satisfy the demands of the Apaches, Burlock agreed to turn over the prisoner to the savages, providing he and his men should not be molested in the future.

This was agreed to, and Miss Conway was at once delivered into the hands of the merciless Apaches. That night the savages made their camp near the old Aztec building on the hill.

This happened on the very day that Richard Hammond was making his journey through the hills on his way to Desert City. He had stopped at the old house, and finding it inhabited by the prospector, he concluded to pass the night in the place. About sundown they were startled by seeing a gang of Apaches approaching, and hastily retreated to the cavern below; but not until they had made the discovery that a female captive was among the Indians. That night the two men succeeded in rescuing the prisoner, and took her to the cavern. Imagine her surprise to find that one of her rescuers was an old friend and former partner of her father!

The old assayer contemplating trouble with the red-skins, had kept his store of provisions in the cavern, where a good supply of water could be found. The assayer had a lot of chemicals in his possession, which were used to make the strange lights seen. These were made for the purpose of frightening the superstitious savages away. Mr. Hammond had constructed a suit out of black bearskin, to which he had fixed the head of a mountain lion, and with this hideous make-up, and by the aid of the skeleton they had found in the cave, he succeeded in infusing terror into the bands of strolling Apaches. Through Annie the two men learned that a band of outlaws had their rendezvous in the neighborhood, and a sharp lookout was kept to prevent their invading the cavern.

They possessed a couple of long-range rifles, and, with these, were able to shoot with

deadly effect at a great distance, and finding that the cavern so completely deadened the sound of their rifles as to render it almost imperceptible on the outside, they hit upon the plan of shooting from the interior of the cavern through the crevices overlooking the hidden valley. Thus it was that they were able to carry on a silent and deadly warfare with the outlaws and Indians. It was their intention to leave the place as soon as they could do so with safety, but the hills were literally swarming with hostile Apaches, and they felt it safer to remain in their stronghold until the coast should be clear. When Annie had discovered Frank Hammond lying insensible at the foot of the cliff near the entrance to the cave, she concluded at once that he was a member of the robbers' gang, but, through pity, she had rendered him assistance, and permitted him to escape, well knowing that any one of the robbers would be in great danger should he be discovered by her protectors.

That night the entire party set out for Desert City, but not until the body of the Robber Queen had been consigned to its last resting-place in a grave at the mouth of the bandits' cave.

The appearance of the party with the captive outlaws created a profound sensation in Desert City. The traitorous city marshal was at once arrested, and subsequently convicted with his associates, who were all sentenced to long terms in the State's Prison.

And thus it was that one of the most dangerous and powerful bands of bandits that ever infested the Territory, was completely broken up. Little remains to be told.

Mark Conway, alias Nat Barker, removed to Arizona and purchased a ranch adjoining that of Hammond.

Frank Hammond and Annie Conway are married, and the great Hammond Ranch is now owned by Richard Hammond & Son.

Mark Conway lives a peaceful life, surrounded by his grazing herds, but he will never forget the startling events of his career when he was known as MAVERICK MOSE, THE ARIZONA DETECTIVE.

THE END.

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